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October 29th: 2 Kings 16 & Acts 7:17-34

October 28, 2020



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The reign of Ahaz in Judah. Moses in Stephen's speech.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

2 Kings 16. In the seventeenth year of Pekah the son of Remeliah, Ahaz the son of Jotham, king of Judah, began to reign. Ahaz was twenty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem.

And he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord his God, as his father David had done, but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel. He even burned his son as an offering, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places, and on the hills, and under every green tree.

Then Rezan king of Syria, and Pekah the son of Remeliah king of Israel, came up to wage war on Jerusalem. And they besieged Ahaz, but could not conquer him. At that time Rezan the king of Syria recovered Eilath for Syria, and drove the men of Judah from Eilath.

And the Edomites came to Eilath, where they dwell to this day. So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria, saying, I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Syria, and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me.

Ahaz also took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the Lord, and in the treasures of the king's house, and sent a present to the king of Assyria. And the king of Assyria listened to him. The king of Assyria marched up against Damascus, and took it, carrying its people captive to Kerr.

And he killed Rezan. When king Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria, he saw the altar that was at Damascus. And king Ahaz sent to Uriah the priest a model of the altar, and its pattern, exact in all its details.

And Uriah the priest built the altar in accordance with all that king Ahaz had sent from Damascus. So Uriah the priest made it, before king Ahaz arrived from Damascus. And when the king came from Damascus, the king viewed the altar.

Then the king drew near to the altar and went up on it, and burned his burnt offering, and his grain offering, and poured out his drink offering, and threw the blood of his peace offerings on the altar. And the bronze altar that was before the Lord he removed from the front of the house, from the place between his altar and the house of the Lord, and put it on the north side of his altar. And king Ahaz commanded Uriah the priest, saying, On the great altar burn the morning burnt offering, and the evening grain offering, and the king's burnt offering, and his grain offering, with the burnt offering of all the people of the land, and their grain offering, and their drink offering, and throw on it all the blood of the burnt offering, and all the blood of the sacrifice.

But the bronze altar shall be for me to inquire by. Uriah the priest did all this, as king Ahaz commanded. And king Ahaz cut off the frames of the stands, and removed the basin from them.

And he took down the sea from off the bronze oxen that were under it, and put it on a stone pedestal. And the covered way for the sabbath that had been built inside the house, and the outer entrance for the king he caused to go around the house of the Lord, because of the king of Assyria. Now the rest of the acts of Ahaz that he did, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah? And Ahaz slept with his fathers, and was buried with his fathers in the city of David.

And Hezekiah his son reigned in his place. 2nd Kings chapter 16 chronicles the reign of Ahaz the son of Jotham, and the grandson of Uzziah as the king of Judah. Ahaz reigns from the 17th year of Pekah the son of Ramaliah in the northern kingdom of Israel, likely in a co-regency with his father Jotham between 735 and 732 BC.

There have been a series of kings in Judah who were largely faithful to the Lord, Joash, Amaziah, Uzziah, and then Jotham. While all of these men were faulted in some regard, for their failure to remove the high places typically, but also for their personal sins, most usually their failure to be faithful in the later years of their reign, Ahaz breaks this streak. Ahaz walks in the ways of the kings of Israel, although no reason is given here for his following of their example.

In Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 9 to 14, the Lord had warned Israel about the practices of the nations whom they were entering into the land to remove. When you come into the land that the Lord your God has given you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination, or tells fortunes, or interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a necromancer, or one who inquires of the dead.

For whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord. And because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out before you. You shall be blameless before the Lord your God.

For these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune-tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you to do this. Ahaz follows the pattern of the Israelite kings, but he also acts according to the practices of the dispossessed nations.

Most notably he makes his son pass through the fire, which Manasseh, the most wicked king of Judah of all, will also do in chapter 21 verse 6. This practice seems to refer to the actual burning up of children as an especially cruel and abominable form of sacrifice. Such a reversion to the practices of the Canaanites is clearly concerning, especially when a line of largely faithful kings might have led us to hope that Judah had progressed beyond such extreme forms of wickedness to more subtle forms. Turning back to the ways of the Canaanites will also mark out Judah for the fate of the Canaanites.

In chapter 15 verse 37 we read of the reign of Jotham. In those days the Lord began to send Rezan the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Ramaliah against Judah. In the reign of Ahaz this alliance becomes a far more serious threat.

The coalition of Syria and Israel was designed to function as part of an anti-Assyrian alliance of smaller nations of the region. Assyria was expanding and threatening to wipe them all out. During Pekah's reign the Assyrians overran large areas of the land of Israel and deported their population to Assyria.

The alliance was a matter of existential urgency for the nations within it. The Assyrians would completely wipe them out if they could not effectively withstand them. The coalition needed to pressure all of the nations in the region to stand with them.

If Ahaz did not join the alliance they would replace him with a puppet king of their own. We get a sense of their intent in Isaiah chapter 7 verses 1 to 6. In the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah, Rezan the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Ramaliah the king of Israel came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it but could not yet mount an attack against it. When the house of David was told Syria is in league with Ephraim the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.

And the Lord said to Isaiah, go out to meet Ahaz you and Sheer Jashub your son at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field and say to him, be careful, be quiet, do not fear and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smouldering stumps of firebrands at the fierce anger of Rezan and Syria and the son of Ramaliah because Syria with Ephraim and the son of Ramaliah has devised evil against you saying let us go up against Judah and terrify it and let us conquer it for ourselves and set up the son of Tbil as king in the midst of it. Israel and the Syrians came up to Jerusalem besieged it but were unsuccessful in their attempts to capture it. However the Syrians were able to strike a crucial blow against Judah by capturing the city of Elath.

This had been Judah's access to the Red Sea and its lucrative trade. It was an extremely strategic area which they had recaptured under Uzziah. After they were driven out by the Assyrians the Edomites returned to possess it.

Facing this threat Ahaz turns to the monster in the north Assyria for aid. Ahaz becomes a tributary and vassal of Assyria stripping the treasuries of the king's house and of the temple and sending them to Tiglath-Pileser looking to him rather than to the lord as his savior. Assyria is encouraged to take more immediate action against the coalition of Israel and Syria and to come to the aid of Judah.

It was presumably in response to this that Assyria subjugated the north of Israel and deported its people and Assyria also killed the king of Syria and captured Damascus. Following the victory of Tiglath-Pileser over Damascus Ahaz goes up to meet him there as an obedient vassal confirming his official relationship with him. Ahaz is a syncretist, someone who is looking to the surrounding nations rather than to the lord for security and aid and someone who assimilates to their religious practices and brings elements of their practice into the worship of the lord.

Seeing a great pagan altar in Damascus he wants to have an altar built according to its pattern in Jerusalem replacing the bronze altar that belonged to the temple. By imposing pagan forms upon the worship of the lord Ahaz was also implying the subservience of the lord himself to the supposedly greater gods of the surrounding nations. Uriah the priest readily and seemingly enthusiastically complies with Ahaz's request.

He has an altar built according to the pattern of the Damascus altar even before Ahaz has returned. On Ahaz's return he inaugurates the altar with a series of sacrifices and

demotes the bronze altar of the lord moving it to the north side treating it as a private altar for his personal use perhaps in practices of divination. From that time on Uriah and the priest must offer sacrifices using Ahaz's pagan altar.

Indeed Ahaz goes further in redesigning the temple in terms of the pattern provided by the Assyrians and the temple in Damascus. He adapts the bronze sea to a more pagan pattern. In the thrall of the king of Assyria he redesigns what was likely a covered walkway for use on the sabbath and also redesigns the king's entrance.

The impetus for these actions is subservience to the king of Assyria for whose sake he will willfully reorder and adulterate the worship of the lord. The lord had given the pattern of the tabernacle on mount Sinai and that pattern was developed by king David according to the vision that the lord gave him. King Ahaz is assuming for himself the privileges of a new Solomon or David and is doing so according to a pattern not received from the lord but from pagan neighbors.

A question to consider what are some of the ways that we might adulterate the worship of the lord in subservience to the dominant forces and rulers of our own age? Acts chapter 7 verses 17 to 34. But as the time of the promise drew near which God had granted to Abraham the people increased and multiplied in Egypt until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants so that they would not be kept alive.

At this time Moses was born and he was beautiful in God's sight and he was brought up for three months in his father's and when he was exposed Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and he was mighty in his words and deeds. When he was 40 years old it came into his heart to visit his brothers the children of Israel and seeing one of them being wronged he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian.

He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand but they did not understand and on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them saying, men you are brothers why do you wrong each other? But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside saying, who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday? At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian where he became the father of two sons. Now when 40 years had passed an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai in a flame of fire in a bush. When Moses saw it he was amazed at the sight and as he drew near to look there came the voice of the Lord.

I am the God of your fathers the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob and Moses trembled and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, take off the sandals from

your feet for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning and I have come down to deliver them and now come I will send you to Egypt.

In the middle of Acts chapter 7 Stephen continues to tell the story of Israel as part of his defense before the council. The primary figures in Stephen's retelling of the Old Testament narrative are Abraham, Joseph and Moses with references to David and Solomon at the end. However by far the most important of these characters is Moses.

Moses and the Exodus narrative offer Stephen a paradigm for thinking about the coming and the work of Christ and are the backbone of his speech. Stephen's telling of the story of the patriarchs was purposefully moving towards and focusing upon the event of their going down into Egypt in the promises of the Exodus given to Abraham in the selling of Joseph into slavery and in the carrying back of the bodies of Jacob and later Joseph to Canaan for burial. As he turns to treat the Exodus Stephen also casts a look back.

He refers to the time of the promise given to Abraham drawing near and also to the king's forgetting of Joseph. Pharaoh commanded that the infants of the Hebrews, the baby boys as we see in Exodus chapter 1, be killed. Moses however was spared.

Moses is described as beautiful in God's sight. He is well favoured by the Lord. On a number of occasions in scripture we have descriptions of future leaders that speak of them as noticeably marked out from early on as persons favoured by the Lord.

That there was something unusual about Moses that marked him out from other infants is suggested in Exodus chapter 2 verse 2. The woman conceived and bore a son and when she saw that he was a fine child she hid him three months. We have a similar statement in chapter 11 verse 23 of the book of Hebrews. By faith Moses when he was born was hidden for three months by his parents because they saw that the child was beautiful and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

Moses was exposed next to the Nile in a basket but was adopted and raised by Pharaoh's daughter receiving education in all of the wisdom of Egypt and being distinguished in his words and deeds. A number of these details from Stephen's account are achieved by joining the dots of the biblical narrative by reading between some lines and perhaps also rest in part on some extra biblical tellings of the story much as modern tellings of the nativity story might involve the donkey and somewhat more questionably an innkeeper. Here one of the details is the suggestion that the infant boys were to be killed by means of exposure, a common form of infanticide in the ancient world, infants being abandoned to die from the harshness of the elements.

As commentators commonly note another of these details that Stephen likely derives from extra biblical rabbinic tradition is the notion that Moses's life could be divided into three blocks of 40 years. Moses appeared before Pharaoh at the age of 80 in Exodus

chapter 7 verse 7 and he led Israel for 40 years in the wilderness before his death at the age of 120. 40 is a significant period of time in scripture.

It is the length of the reigns of David and Solomon for instance. It was the age at which Joshua was sent as a spy. It was the length of time in the wilderness.

When he had attained to maturity Moses intervened to defend a Hebrew who was being beaten by an Egyptian, avenging him by killing the Egyptian. While many have regarded Moses's actions as sinful, Stephen presents his action as one expressive of being commissioned by God as a deliverer of his people. Moses was sent by God to deliver Israel and they did not recognize him.

He was rejected by his people as a mediator who tried to get his brothers to be at peace with each other. Stephen's description of the event portrays Moses more as a reconciler and peacemaker than the account of Exodus does, for which Moses is more a man opposing injustice. Stephen's Moses is a ruler and a judge as Christ is.

Moses leaving Egypt is portrayed more as a result of the rejection of his people than due to the fear of Pharaoh as it is in Exodus chapter 2 verses 13 to 15. When he went out the next day behold two Hebrews were struggling together and he said to the man in the wrong, why do you strike your companion? He answered, who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian? Then Moses was afraid and thought, surely the thing is known. When Pharaoh heard of it he sought to kill Moses but Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian.

Moses had been sent by God to his people but he was rejected by his own and he fled to Midian. Like Joseph, who would also be the saviour of his family, Moses was forced away from his brothers, becoming an exile. His brothers or his own people have not acknowledged him.

Stephen mentions some interesting details in his account. For instance, here he notes that Moses had two sons. If we were to read of an exile who had two sons, our minds might first go to Joseph, who fathered Ephraim and Manasseh in Genesis chapter 41 verses 50 to 52.

That Moses had two sons is not actually mentioned in the account of Exodus chapter 2. Only Gershom is mentioned there. Eleazar, his second son, is not mentioned until Exodus chapter 18 when Jethro, his father-in-law, brought Moses' sons and wife to meet him in Sinai. Perhaps part of Stephen's purpose here is to highlight resemblances between Joseph and Moses.

Stephen also telescopes events on occasions, as he does in his description of the purchase of the tomb and the burial of the patriarchs in Shechem. After 40 years passed, an angel appeared to Moses in a burning bush. The symmetry of the passing of two

periods of 40 years parallels the two visitations.

The first time when he visited his brothers, the children of Israel, but was rejected, in verse 23 and following, and the second when the angel appears to him in the burning bush, initiating the story of the Exodus. The commissioning of Moses to lead the Exodus at the burning bush displays the fact of the Lord's calling of him, even though Israel might earlier have rejected him. A question to consider, what parallels and contrasts can you recognize between Moses and Joseph?