

Feast of Dedication 2006

Background (Review from Last Year)

The Jewish feast of Hannukah, or Dedication, is not one of the Mosaic feasts, nor is its institution recorded in the Bible (like Purim). However, our Lord celebrated it in John 10:22, and so we include it in our cycle of studies on the feasts.

Daniel (11) prophesied the main events of the story. The prophecy concerns the Syrian general Antiochus Epiphanes, who attempted to invade Egypt but was deterred by the Romans. In returning to Syria, he took out his frustration on Jerusalem, setting up an altar or image to Zeus in place of the brazen altar, and offering swine, in 167 BC.

The priest Mattathias and his sons, especially Judas, called “Maccabeus” (the hammer), fought against the Syrians. Eventually, they retook Jerusalem and purged the temple. The restoration of sacrifice was on the same day, three years later, that Antiochus offered pagan sacrifices, the 25th of Kislev. Judas Maccabaeus ordained that the nation should celebrate this deliverance annually.

The name of the feast is “Hannukah,” or Dedication, and reflects the feast's focus on the rededication of the temple after it had been defiled by Antiochus Epiphanes. This is not the only time in Israel's history that the temple was defiled and then purified. We can identify at least seven such episodes (including the original one).

The lesson of Dedication is in many ways similar to that of the footwashing in John 13. Sin has a way of defiling the things of God in this present world. The duty of God's people is to recognize this defilement and deal with it.

This year we study the dedication of the temple by Hezekiah in 726 BC, after it had been defiled by his father Ahaz.

The Defilement, ch. 28

Hanukkah was necessary because Antiochus had defiled the temple. Every rededication is preceded by a defilement. It is important that we learn how to turn back to the Lord, but even more important that we be warned not to turn away from the Lord in the first place.

The dedication of 2 Chr 29 was necessary because of the defilement incurred by Ahaz in ch. 28. The record of his sin has three phases.

1-4, Sin.--His sin included idolatry and infant sacrifice.

5-8, 16-21, Chastisement.--God punished him with military defeat, at the hands both of foreigners and of the northern kingdom. His armies were defeated in war, his people taken captive, and his treasury depleted.

23-25, Stubbornness.--Far from learning from his defeat, he took it as evidence that the gods of the pagans were more powerful than Jehovah, and adopted their worship. See also 2 Kings 16:10-18. His corruption included

- Adapting pagan practices (replacing the brazen altar with an altar from Damascus)
- Perverting the true faith: using the brazen altar for divination

- Syncretism: expecting the priests to offer Moses' sacrifices on a pagan altar.

The Restorer, 29:1-2

As is customary in Kings and Chronicles, the description of Hezekiah's reign begins with four standard kinds of information:

- his age on ascending the throne
- how long he reigned
- his mother's name (optional)
- a moral characterization of his reign.

The fourth one shows the author's ethical concern. These are not just dry facts for the archives.

- Accession age is an indication of the king's maturity. Isa 3:4 warned that because of the people's sin, "I will give children *to be* their princes, and babes shall rule over them." Isaiah was a contemporary of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Of the eleven kings through Jotham, only two were younger than 35 at accession (and the ages of two others are unknown). Of the nine kings after him, none was older than 25.
- Length of rule is a measure of the stability of the kingdom and his administrative skill.
- The mother is often named. Sometimes she is explicitly blamed for the king's moral failings (Ahaziah, 2 Chr 22:2,3). The historian seems to realize that "the hand that rocks the cradle, rules the world." We know nothing else of Abijah the daughter of Zechariah. But from what we see of her son, we may expect that she was a godly woman, especially when we consider the influence of his father.
- The general nature of his rule. Hezekiah is remembered by the Jewish sages as one of only three truly righteous kings; the others are David and Josiah. Hezekiah was unparalleled for his faith (2 Kings 18:5), while Josiah was unparalleled for his zeal and orthodoxy (2 Kings 23:25).

29:3-ch. 30, The Restoration and Dedication

After his introduction in 29:1-2, Hezekiah's dedication of the temple has three broad phases..

- 29:3-19, cleansing the building
- 29:20-36, dedicatory offerings
- ch. 30, restored passover celebration

We studied ch. 30 last Passover. This year we will study the cleansing of the building, and next year, Lord willing, the dedicatory sacrifices.

3, Summary

3 in the first year of his reign, in the first month.--Not, "in the first year, in the first month of his reign." He would likely have been crowned in the fall, at the feast of tabernacles, the opening of the secular year. But the first month here is the first month of the sacred calendar, Nisan, in the spring. It's clear that he has been thinking about this restoration and planning it for some time. It is his first priority

as king.

opened the doors of the house of the LORD, and repaired them.--contrast 28:24, where Ahaz closed the doors. Hezekiah is returning Israel to the worship of God.

4-19, Detail

First he Exhorts the priests and Levites, then we see their Execution of their charge, and finally they Explain that they have finished the work.

4-11, Exhortation to the Priests

4 And he brought in the priests and the Levites.--A compromised company. They, or at least the chief priest, had aided and abetted Ahaz in his idolatrous syncretism.

and gathered them together into the east street.--"Street" in Hebrew is just "wide place," not necessarily a route that goes somewhere, and is better translated "plaza." In a walled city, the streets (*\$wk* or *xuc*) tend to converge on the gates, and there is an open area just inside each gate where they come together. The East Gate would face the Mount of Olives, and would be the main entrance into the temple courtyard. So he has gathered them at the entrance to the temple.

5 And said unto them.--Hezekiah's speech begins with a tri-partite command, rooted in a tri-partite summary of the peoples' sin. Then he points out the consequences of this sin, and urges them forward.

5, The Three-fold Command

Hear me, ye Levites.--Why does he start with them, rather than with the priests? Perhaps because of the hands-on practical nature of the work to be done? Or because the priests had been compromised by their offerings earlier? The Levites are in focus throughout the cleansing. He outlines three steps:

1. **sanctify now yourselves.**--Unholy people cannot properly care for a holy place.
2. **sanctify the house.**--This refers to the entire temple compound, where the false altar had been erected. Compare 2 Chr 23:14; 2 Chr 20:5, which refers to non-Levites being "in" the house of the Lord.
3. **carry forth the filthiness out of the holy place.**--This refers to the interior of the temple proper.

Each of these three steps corresponds to the history that he is trying to overcome: it begins with personal sin, and ends with defilement of the temple.

6-7, The Three-fold Sin

6 For our fathers have trespassed ... done that which was evil ... forsaken him.--The root cause is not ceremonial defect, but personal sin, breaking God's law and abandoning him. This is why the Levites must begin by sanctifying themselves.

[they] have turned away their faces ... and turned their backs.--Because of their sin, they cannot stand in the presence of the Lord. They feel uncomfortable in his presence, and like Adam and Eve, turn to flee from his presence. They don't want anything to do with the temple as a whole. We can imagine them stomping out of the temple courts.

7 Also they have shut up the doors ... put out the lamps ... not burned incense nor offered burnt offerings in the holy place.--Now he turns to the holy place, the *hekal*, the temple building proper. Not content to absent themselves from the house of God, they have taken steps to suspend its services so that others cannot turn to it.

8-10, The Consequences

8 Wherefore the wrath of the LORD was upon Judah and Jerusalem. ... 10 it is in mine heart to make a covenant with the LORD ... that his fierce wrath may turn away from us.--As we have seen, Ahaz's apostasy in ch. 28 was accompanied by national disaster. Hezekiah resolves to reverse this course by renewing the covenant. Again, as with the Levites, the correction must go to the heart of the peoples' relation with the Lord, and not just restoration of the building.

11, Final Exhortation

the LORD hath chosen you.--He urges upon the Levites their responsibility as the ones appointed by God to minister to him. In spite of the failings of the sons of Levi under Ahaz, "the gifts and calling of God *are* without repentance," Rom 11:29. God's people cannot escape their responsibility to serve him. We did not save ourselves, and we cannot lose ourselves. God will track us down and hound us by his Spirit until we yield to him and serve him as we ought.

12-17, Execution

12 Then the Levites arose.--Again, we hear nothing of the priests. The Levites are in force, not only the three main families (Kohath, Merari, Gershon), but also the lead musicians (Heman, Asaph).

Now we observe how they follow the king's three-fold command.

15 they ... sanctified themselves.--Step one was personal sanctification. Exod 19:14, 15; 1 Sam 21:4,5 suggest that this involved abstention from any activity that would incur ritual uncleanness. They recognize that correcting the effects of Ahaz's profane behavior will require them to observe the utmost holiness of life. (Note: need to distinguish common/holy from unclean/clean. Correcting uncleanness requires sacrifice throughout Leviticus; sanctification does not.)

[they] came ... to cleanse the house of the LORD.--This was the second step to which Hezekiah urged them. They had to begin with the outer court, as we'll see when the author recaps the chronology in v. 17.

16 And the priests.--Finally, we hear about the priests. The third part of the king's command required them to take out the filthiness from the holy place. But the Levites were forbidden to enter the *hekal*. Only the priests could go there. So they are pressed into service. The priests bring the defilement out of the temple proper, to a place where the Levites could pick it up and dispose of it appropriately.

The Levites might have reasoned, "The priests are compromised, and they have no ambition for this work, so we need to go into the temple and cleanse it." But they were forbidden direct contact with the contents of the holy place (Num 4:15), and their zeal for cleansing would be no excuse for violating the law.

Matthew Henry notes,

The priests were none of them mentioned as leading men in this work, yet none but they durst

go into the inner part of the house, no, not to cleanse it, which they did, and perhaps the high priest into the holy of holies, to cleanse that. And, though the Levites had the honour to be the leaders in the work, they did not disdain to be servitors to the priests according to their office; for what filth the priests brought into the court the Levites carried to the brook Kidron. Let not men's usefulness, be it ever so eminent, make them forget their place.

Now the author recaps the process, summarizing the chronology.

17 Now they began on the first *day* of the first month.--This means that Hezekiah's exhortation to them must have taken place before the first of the month, for they are already prepared for the work.

on the eighth day of the month came they to the porch.--Up to this time, they were occupied with defilements in the court, such as removing Ahaz's altar and restoring the altar of burnt offering to its rightful place.

[then] they sanctified the house of the LORD [for] eight [more] days.--This is the period during which they engaged the priests to clean out the inside of the *hekal*.

in the sixteenth day of the first month they made an end.--So the total process took 16 days. Note that this took them beyond the official beginning of Passover (14 Nisan). Hezekiah may have hoped that the process could be done in a week, so that he could have kept the passover at the proper time.

18-19, Explanation

They did more than they were required to do. They realized, as Hezekiah may not have realized, that in addition to the building, the conduct of temple worship required the vessels that Ahaz had damaged (28:24). So in addition to the outer court and the inner sanctum, they got the vessels ready as well.

Summary

We will defer study of the dedicatory offerings until next year. Key lessons from this passage:

- The source of defilement lies in sin, and shows itself through syncretism and compromise.
- Rededication requires a prepared leader, and in Hezekiah's case the Lord appears to have used his mother to give him a heart for the things of God.
- The process must begin with sanctification of those who would set things right. Unholy people cannot sanctify the temple of God.