

Part 1: An Overview of the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament

C. The Kingdom of Israel

9. The Divided Kingdom

We concluded our look at Israel's Golden Years by mentioning God's warning to Solomon at the occasion of the dedication of the temple. It was that he and his people must never turn away and serve other gods or else Israel would be cut off from the land and even the magnificent temple would become a heap of rubble.

Solomon's wisdom gave him a good start at heeding this warning. But over time he got preoccupied with his projects. He kept building and accumulating, and gradually his attention was diverted from the original object of his devotion, the Lord God, to his possessions, his building projects, and his wives. By secular standards, Solomon was the best possible ruler. Yes, taxes were high, but Israel had a world-class economy.

Yet, one thing Solomon did not do very well over the long haul, was take time to worship in the temple that he had built for God. He did not take the time to read the scriptures, and to look over the commandments and to review the warnings that God had given his people. Solomon took care of many things but he neglected his heart, his soul.

Proverbs 24:30ff describes what happened to the vineyard of "someone who has no sense." It became infested with thorns and other weeds and the stone walls fell into ruin. This was obviously a picture of what would happen to physically lazy and negligent farmers. But it also is a picture of what happened to Solomon; he neglected his heart as the sluggard did his vineyard. As a result, his spirit became infested with spiritual thorns and his life became impoverished.

The problems began right at the start of Solomon's reign, when he started accumulating horses and wealth and wives of foreign birth. This, and Solomon's neglect of God's word, was contrary to God's command in Deut.17:16-20.

The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, "You are not to go back that way again." He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.

Compare this to what happened: *Solomon accumulated chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he kept in the chariot cities and also with him in Jerusalem. (1 Kings 10:26)* Besides that, early on in his reign, Solomon had married the daughter of Egypt's Pharaoh. This was a political decision, not unusual for his time. But the problem was, it violated God's command against intermarriage with the heathen peoples. And this was by no means Solomon's only disobedient marriage. Let's look at 1 Kings 11:1-8:

King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter--Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done. On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods.

Materially, the nation looked healthy. But spiritually it and its king were sickened as the horses, wealth, and wives accumulated. And Solomon apparently didn't even notice that he had become spiritually lazy and careless. He probably had good intentions; perhaps he knew he was too busy for his own good, but thought he had lots of time. He would finish this or that important project, and then devote more time to the Lord. But it didn't happen. In fact, we don't know if he ever regained his wisdom. If Solomon did repent, it was at least too late to avoid all of the consequences of his sin and neglect. Nearly the last word that we have on the subject is of Solomon's latter day troubles, which began in earnest after this message from the Lord (1 Kings 11:9-13):

The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the Lord's command. So the LORD said to Solomon, "Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates. By God's grace he did, however, offer this important concession: Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son. Yet I will not tear the whole kingdom from him, but will give him one tribe for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen."

After this, the Lord raised up adversaries against Solomon. When, upon his death he was succeeded by his son Rehoboam, the adversary that proved most formidable was Jeroboam, one of Solomon's former officials. Rehoboam might have eased the discontent in Israel if he had been a little wiser about how he answered their complaints about the heavy taxation and other burdens they had endured under Solomon. Instead, pledged to increase their burdens.

Shortly afterward, all of the tribes of Israel except for Rehoboam's own rebelled against the king, leaving him to rule only the tribe of Judah (sometimes called the Southern Kingdom) with Jeroboam over the other tribes (the Northern Kingdom). And this split—resulting in a divided kingdom—was a disaster from which the nation never recovered.

The two realms were frequently at one another's throats. Both were descendants of Abraham, but the history of the "chosen people" became one of turmoil, dynastic double-dealing, murder, plot and counterplot, strife at home and abroad, and concern to retain and extend boundaries.

Jeroboam had a significant problem from the start because his people were used to going to Jerusalem to sacrifice at the temple, the only place that the Lord had authorized sacrifices to be made. 1 Kings 12:26-27 tells us, *Jeroboam thought to himself, "The kingdom will now likely revert to the house of David. If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem, they will again give their allegiance to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah. They will kill me and return to King Rehoboam."*

So Jeroboam decided to have golden calves made and set up in two northern towns: Bethel and Dan, which he designated as official alternates to the temple in Jerusalem. Besides this, he appointed non-Levites as priests. Then he, himself, took the lead in offering sacrifices on the new altars. God sent a prophet to announce God's judgment for this but Jeroboam would not change his mind, even though the hand he raised against the prophet miraculously shriveled up and was not healed until the prophet prayed for him.

Thereafter, Jeroboam's provisions for false worship became known as "the sins of Jeroboam." And this would be referenced in God's final verdict for each subsequent king of the Northern Kingdom: "He did evil in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit; he continued in them." Judah's kings would have their problems too, but at least they would escape this verdict.

Nevertheless the Lord had patience with the kings and tribes who were unfaithful to His law, and not only warned them continually by His prophets, and disciplined them by threats of punishment and by the fulfillment of those threats upon the kings and all the people, but repeatedly showed His grace towards them for the sake of His covenant with Abraham.

The prophets were particularly active from this time on. They did their work in the conviction that God had sent them to speak to God's people. Their utterances usually began with, "Thus says the Lord," and concluded with, "says the Lord," or, "the oracle of the Lord."

Today the popular belief about prophets is that their essential role was to predict future events. They did do this at times. But their main concern was to speak to the Israelites about their condition before God *then and there*. If they made predictions, these mostly had to do with Israel's immediate future rather than the more distant future. The word commonly used in Hebrew for a prophet describes one who "calls," "speaks," "names," and "proclaims." The prophet is therefore one who acts as a spokesperson for another, one who makes known the divine will.

A helpful insight occurs in Exodus 4:16 where God tells Moses this about Aaron. *He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him.* In other words, what it meant for Aaron to be Moses' prophet was that it would be as if he were Moses' mouth. It was clear already here that a prophet did not have to be creative, but only faithful to proclaim the message he or she received.

If a prophet of God was faithful, then the truth of what was said would be proved by events to follow. In fact, the only way prophets of God ever got into trouble (I mean as regards prophecies that did not come true) was if they deviated from God's script.

Even today, the test of a true prophet is whether his or her words are true. Whatever a true prophet says about the present must be in line with what God has said in his Word. And whatever a true prophet predicts about the future must happen, or else he is not a true prophet of God.

The prophets of Israel were always calling God's people back. They weren't challenging them to take up some new and unknown task, but simply to return to the memory of what God did for them in the Exodus from Egypt and the entrance into the Promised Land and to live according the commands God had given at that time.

As an illustration of this and of how God's message was typically received in the Northern Kingdom, let's take a look at one of the major interactions between the prophet Elijah and King Ahab of Israel. In a political history of Israel, as the NIV Study Bible makes clear in its introduction to the books of Kings, Ahab would not have received as much attention as many other of Israel's kings, including his father Omri, who was remembered by the surrounding kingdoms long after his death. But Scripture is more interested in covenant history. And Ahab's actions and inactions posed a more significant than usual threat to Israel's faithfulness to their covenant with the Lord. Ahab is said to have done more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of the kings who preceded him.

As confirmation of this, the Bible says that he allowed Jericho to be rebuilt as a walled city. But the moment he did this he unleashed a curse the Lord had put on Jericho and its rebuilders centuries earlier (Josh 6:26): *"Cursed before the Lord be the man that rises up and rebuilds this city, Jericho: At the cost of his firstborn will he lay its foundations; at the cost of his youngest will he set up its gates.* Jericho's ruins had been preserved to proclaim God's judgment against the Canaanites and his grace to Israel in providing them a homeland. But Ahab was deaf to this twofold message. In fact, by rebuilding Jericho, Ahab gave another message: "This is my city and devoted to my glory."

1 Kings 16:31 gives further specifics of Ahab's sinfulness: *He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam, but he also married an unbelieving woman, Jezebel, daughter of the Sidonian (Canaanite) king, and he began to serve and worship her gods.*

The main gods of Jezebel and the Canaanites were two, Baal and Asherah; these male and female gods were worshiped and sacrificed to so that they in turn would ensure reproductive success—good harvests from their fields and many healthy children in their households. And Ahab not only tolerated the worship of his pagan wife; he took an active role in leading Israel in that false religion. The sins of Jeroboam's violated the 2nd commandment--about making images of the Lord God, and the worship of the Canaanite gods violated the first—against worshipping gods besides the one true God.

The beginning of God's answer to Ahab's presumption was seen in the death of the sons of Ahab's architect and builder of Jericho. And more of his response is seen in the message he sent Elijah to deliver, the message that God was going to withhold rain from the land. There's a good reason God chose drought as the way to press his claim with Israel. He was cutting off the possibility of life and growth that their idol gods were supposed to produce.

Furthermore, this was just what God had earlier said would be among the curses for disobedience; see Deut 28:18,23: *The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks....The sky over your head will be bronze, the ground beneath you iron.* And of course, these were the very things that would happen in the drought. Without rain, the sky had become like bronze and the earth as hard as iron.

Now, even though Ahab knew Elijah to be a prophet of God, we may understand if the king was somewhat skeptical of his pronouncement. He may even have dismissed Elijah as being mentally deranged. In fact, Ahab would only come to see the truth of Elijah's words over time – in the months and years of drought that would come.

Scripture doesn't say very much directly about the next few years without rain except to say (18:2) that the famine was severe. The king had people out searching for Elijah but nobody could find him. He had disappeared - not out of fear of Ahab, but out of obedience to the command of the Lord, withdrawing to allow the effects of the Lord's judgment to become fully apparent.

When Elijah finally reappeared, it was it was to summon Ahab and representatives from all of Israel to Mt. Carmel for a showdown between the Lord and the gods of the Canaanites. Once there, Elijah put this question to them: *"How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."*

The people said nothing in response; probably their faith was so weak that they couldn't decide. But more than this the words of Ps. 135:15-18 had come true for Israel. *The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.* That's what had happened; Israel had become dumb, blind, and deaf, like her idols.

It was then that Elijah proposed a contest to give the people some help. In brief, it was that each side build an altar and prepare a sacrifice to their god, and then, whichever god was able to light the fire to consume the sacrifice would clearly be the most powerful.

It was no contest, of course, even when Elijah poured water over the Lord's altar to compound the difficulty. That's because Baal and Asherah were only fictions of people's imaginations; Yahweh alone was real. And he answered Elijah's prayers and proved himself to be worthy of the people's worship. This they enthusiastically gave and further demonstrated their allegiance by participating in the Lord's judgment against the false prophets. And after further prayer, the Lord brought an end to the drought of rain on the land, and also the drought of his spiritual blessings.

But the people would soon relapse under the continuing disobedient leadership of Ahab and his successors. And the decline of at least the northern half of the divided kingdom of Israel would continue.