

14. The Decline and Demise of David's Kingdom – The Southern Kingdom of Judah

Rehoboam's decision to follow in his father's footsteps was used by the Lord to fulfill His determination to cut David's kingdom into two pieces. While David's dynasty and throne continued in the southern kingdom of Judah (comprised of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin with the capital at Jerusalem), the Davidic kingdom had been reduced to only a faint glimmer of its former glory. There was no doubt that the Lord was still wielding the sword of judgment against David's house.

In many ways both of the Israelite sub-kingdoms led very similar existences: Both followed the same general path of apostasy and both met with the same outcomes of desolation and captivity. But, whereas Israel was characterized from the beginning as an apostate entity in rebellion against David's house and kingdom (and therefore a kingdom set against Yahweh Himself), the southern kingdom of Judah enjoyed periods of relative faithfulness and restoration from waywardness. Unlike Israel, Judah had several kings whose reign was characterized by relative obedience to Yahweh's covenant.

Nevertheless, as Jeroboam had done in the north, Rehoboam set the overall tone for the remnant of David's kingdom in the south (1 Kings 14:21-24) and, in the end, the Lord condemned Judah as more vile and guilty than her sister Israel (cf. Ezekiel 16, 23). While most of Israel's kings simply followed the "sin of Jeroboam" in worshipping Yahweh in connection with the calves at Dan and Bethel, the majority of Judah's kings followed Rehoboam in devoting themselves to the gods of Canaan. Only Asa, Jehoshaphat, Uzziah, Jotham, Hezekiah, and Josiah directly promoted the worship of Yahweh.

Because the three main epochs in the life of the northern kingdom were defined by its relationship with Judah in the south, Israel's history provides insight into the progress of Judah's existence leading up to its own destruction and captivity.

- a. The pattern established by Rehoboam continued until the reign of his grandson Asa. Asa not only removed the idols and cult prostitutes associated with his father and grandfather, he stripped his own mother of her royal status because she had made an Asherah image. Though he failed to remove the high places scattered throughout Judah, the text records that his heart was sincerely devoted to Yahweh all his days (1 Kings 15:9-15).
- b. Jehoshaphat continued the devotion of his father Asa, but, like him, his reign was not without blemish. He allied himself with the notorious Ahab, giving his son to Ahab's daughter in marriage (ref. again 2 Kings 8:16-18; 2 Chronicles 18:1). This alliance drew Jehoshaphat into battle with Israel against the Arameans – a battle which, in spite of Ahab's guile, resulted in his death just as the prophet Micaiah had predicted (1 Kings 22:1-39; cf. 2 Chronicles 18:1-34). Later, after the death of Ahab's son Ahaziah, his brother Jehoram assumed the throne of Israel and once again Jehoshaphat came to Israel's assistance, this time in its war against Moab (ref. 2 Kings 3:1-7). Despite his notable faithfulness (ref. 2 Chronicles 19-20), Jehoshaphat's reign was tarnished by his alliance with Ahab's house (20:35-37).

- c. Jehoshaphat had allied himself with Ahab and his house for political and economic reasons, but that alliance ended up having huge religious and theocratic implications for Judah. By taking Ahab's daughter Athaliah to be his son's wife, Jehoshaphat effectively introduced Jezebel's pagan and wicked influence into Judah. For Athaliah was a virtual duplicate of her mother – controlled by the same evil passions, devoted to the same godless and self-serving agenda, and able to wield the same perverse influence over her husband (2 Chronicles 21:4-6).

When her son Ahaziah, king of Judah, and forty-two of his relatives were slain by Jehu (2 Kings 9-10), Athaliah immediately saw her opportunity to seize the throne for herself. Determined to eliminate everyone who could possibly threaten her claim to the throne of Judah, she had all of the male members of Ahaziah's house put to death. The depth of her evil is seen in the fact that she was ordering the murder of her own grandchildren. Athaliah's infant grandson Joash (Jehoash) alone was spared, and only because his aunt Jehoshabeath whisked him away and hid him along with his nurse. For six years Joash was safely hidden from his murderous grandmother, kept in the one place she had absolutely nothing to do with, namely the temple in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 22:1-12).

Athaliah's actions were far more significant than simply an illegal and immoral seizure of Judah's throne. Yahweh had never endorsed a woman to reign over David's house and kingdom, but even if He had, Athaliah wasn't a member of David's royal line. But more grievous than those offenses against the Lord, she had attempted to put an end to David's dynasty by killing all of Ahaziah's sons. As the queen of Israel, Jezebel had presided over a kingdom that originated with and had been oriented toward opposition to David's house, and now her daughter was actively seeking to destroy that house. The gravity of Jehoshaphat's expedient political decision was that it nearly resulted in the destruction of his father's dynasty, and, with it, his kingdom. What he thought would serve the well-being of David's kingdom came frightfully close to vanquishing it.

- d. In the seventh year of Athaliah's rule the Davidic seed Joash was brought out of hiding and crowned king of Judah in the temple courtyard in the presence of all the people, the priests and Levites (2 Kings 11:1-12; cf. 2 Chronicles 24:1ff). When Athaliah realized what was happening she rushed into the coronation proceedings shouting the charge of treason. But despite her loud protest, Jehoiada the priest commanded that she be taken captive and put to death away from the Lord's house (11:13-16). Slaying her in front of the temple would have been a defiling act, but Athaliah's removal also spoke symbolically of her having no share in David's kingdom as represented by Yahweh's house in Jerusalem.

In tangible witness to the apostasy of their rules, the temple had come into disrepair under Jehoram, Ahaziah and Athaliah and Joash undertook its renovation. But he did so, not out of concern for the physical structure as such, but as an act of faithfulness to the covenant Jehoiada made between Yahweh, Judah and himself as the new king (11:17-12:16; 2 Chronicles 23:16-24:14).

In the covenant, Jehoiada rededicated David's house – his royal dynasty and kingdom – to Yahweh and the sons of Judah responded by destroying the house of Baal that had been built in Jerusalem along with its altars and images. They also put Baal's temple priest to death. Joash's early rule was marked by faithfulness to Yahweh, *but his actions were notably only an expression of Jehoiada's leadership and piety*. Joash was only seven years old when he assumed the throne of Judah and he regarded Jehoiada – who had cared for him since infancy – as a father figure and mentor. Thus when Jehoiada died Joash was left anchorless and began to wander from the Lord (ref. 12:2). He sought out ungodly counselors and soon conspired to put Jehoiada's son to death. That act of murder resulted in Joash's assassination at the hands of his own servants (2 Chronicles 24:15-25).

- e. Joash's inconsistent reign was subsequently duplicated in those of his son (Amaziah) and grandson (Uzziah). In the case of Amaziah, the Chronicler notes that *"he did right in the sight of the Lord, but not with a whole heart"* (25:1-2). So, for instance, after deferring to godly counsel to reject Israel's military assistance against Edom and subsequently enjoying a spectacular victory over that nation, Amaziah proceeded to bring the Edomite idols back to Jerusalem and make them his own (25:5-14). The Lord's response was to use Amaziah's pride of conquest to incite a war with Israel. This brought the Israelite-Judean alliance (and the second epoch in their relationship) to an end and reinitiated the conflict between the two Israelite kingdoms. The outcome was that Israel gave Judah a humiliating defeat; though Amaziah was allowed to live and continue his reign, the king of Israel tore down part of the wall surrounding Jerusalem and took the precious articles of the temple and Amaziah's palace back to Samaria (25:17-24).

Uzziah likewise served Yahweh inconsistently. In large part he sought the Lord and adhered to His covenant, but he also strayed from Him. Uzziah is best known for his reckless act of entering the temple and burning incense on the altar. Not only did he exceed his station, he became enraged when the priests confronted him. God responded by smiting Uzziah with leprosy and, to the day of his death, he remained in isolation with his son Jotham acting in his behalf (26:1-5, 16-21).

- f. Jotham ruled as a faithful son of David but was unable to turn around Judah's advancing apostasy (27:1-9). In that sense Jotham's son Ahaz was a "man after Judah's heart," for he followed in the ways of the kings of Israel, even leading Judah to worship Baal as Jezebel had done. But his sin was far worse: *Ahaz brought Judah's apostasy to a low point by reviving an ancient pagan practice that even the godless kings of Israel didn't embrace*. He erected an altar outside Jerusalem to the Canaanite deity Molech and sacrificed his sons there (28:1-4).

As with Jeroboam in Israel, Ahaz' idolatry set a precedent that came to epitomize Judah's apostasy and the propriety of its desolation (cf. Leviticus 20:1-5; Jeremiah 7:1-34, 19:1-13, 32:26-35). In retribution, God sent the Syrian-Israelite coalition against Judah and it handed David's house a crushing defeat. In fear for his throne, Ahaz formed his own alliance with the king of Assyria (28:5-19).

Ahaz bribed Tiglath-pileser to come to his defense and, after the Assyrian army had conquered the Arameans (Syrians) on his behalf, Ahaz traveled to Damascus to meet the Assyrian king. When he saw the great altar there he determined to have a replica built in Jerusalem; the gods of the Arameans had given them much success and Ahaz sought to gain their help for himself. In that way he supplanted Yahweh with the gods of the nations (2 Kings 16:1-18; 2 Chronicles 28:22-25).

It was in this context of religious and theocratic apostasy that Isaiah proclaimed the Immanuel prophecy to Ahaz (ref. Isaiah 7-11). This prophecy was previously considered in relation to the northern kingdom and its desolation, but it equally concerned the kingdom of Judah. For at the heart of the prophecy was Yahweh's promise to preserve the house of David. No enemy, however formidable, would be able to overthrow that house because of His faithfulness to David.

Ahaz lived to see the Lord deliver Jerusalem from the Syrian-Israelite alliance (ref. 2 Kings 16:5-17:6), but the promised deliverance from the Assyrians would not occur until the reign of his son Hezekiah. At that time, while Sennacherib's army was moving through the cities of Judah on its way to Jerusalem, Yahweh's angel went through the Assyrian camp at night and silently killed 185,000 of its soldiers. Horrified at what he saw and finding no explanation, Sennacherib quickly assembled the remainder of his army and led them back to his own country (cf. 2 Kings 18-19; 2 Chronicles 32:1-22; Isaiah 36-37).

- g. In spite of Ahaz' horrendous offense, Yahweh delivered David's house from the hand of the Assyrians as He had promised (ref. again Isaiah 7:1-8:10). But Judah's incorrigible apostasy demanded that it, too, suffer the fate of its sister in the north. Assyria would not prevail against Jerusalem and David's house, but its successor Babylon would. In 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, initiated Judah's final destruction. The Egyptian pharaoh had already deposed Jehoahaz and set his brother Jehoiakim on Judah's throne as a vassal king. Four years later Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem and began his harassment of Judah. Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin succeeded him, but after only three months he, too, was taken to Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar appointed his uncle Zedekiah as his vassal king in Jerusalem (ref. 2 Chronicles 36:1-10). This appointment – though unknown to Nebuchadnezzar – complied with Yahweh's judgment against David's dynasty: *Jehoiachin was to be the last of the line of Davidic kings; no descendent of his would ever sit on David's throne* (Jeremiah 22:24-30).

David's dynasty was severed, and the end of his kingdom was at hand. Warned to yield himself and his kingdom to Babylon's yoke, Zedekiah decided after nine years to revolt. Nebuchadnezzar responded by surrounding Jerusalem and cutting off its supply. Before long, starving and plagued with disease as the Lord had threatened from the beginning (cf. Deuteronomy 28:45ff; Jeremiah 19:1-9; Ezekiel 5:1-12), Jerusalem could no longer withstand the Babylonian siege. Breaking through its walls, the Babylonian army burned the city and its temple to the ground. The sword promised against David's house had completed its work.