

13. The Decline and Demise of David's Kingdom – The Northern Kingdom of Israel

In carrying out His judgment against David's house, Yahweh first brought the sword of death and destruction upon David's immediate household. But it was not to stop there. Absalom's vengeful designs upon his father's life and kingdom infected David's theocratic house, poisoning the minds even of the elders of Israel who had previously served David with faithful devotion (2 Samuel 17:1-4). Though Absalom's attempt to seize the kingdom was successfully resisted and David was restored to the throne of Israel, his actions demonstrated that the sword had moved beyond the walls of the palace; more than that, it signaled the beginning of the end of David's kingdom.

Yahweh's judgment meant the desolation of David's house, but His covenant promised a Davidic son who would build His house. Because of Solomon's typological role as the first referent of that promise, God held the kingdom together throughout his reign. For the Davidic Covenant presupposed and furthered Yahweh's ancient oath to recover sacred space as first portrayed in the Garden; thus it was necessary that the son of David build the Lord's sanctuary in the context of *shabbat* and *shalom*, expressed in Solomon's kingdom in its supernatural prosperity, security, and peace (1 Kings 4:21-34, 10:21-27).

- a. But after Solomon's death the decline of the Israelite theocracy accelerated. The first development was the division of David's kingdom into the two sub-kingdoms of *Israel* and *Judah*. The former consisted of the northern ten Israelite tribes while the latter consisted of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin in the south.

Notably, it was the perpetuation of Solomon's exploitative practices by his son Rehoboam that provided the historical impetus for the fracturing of the kingdom. Solomon had subjected the Israelites in the north to hard service (cf. 1 Kings 11:28, 12:18), and when they came together at Shechem to crown Rehoboam king they petitioned him to lighten their load. Solomon's counselors instructed the new king to heed their request, but Rehoboam chose to listen to his own advisers and the result was disastrous. Learning what lay ahead for them under the Davidic king, the northern tribes realized they "had no portion in David" and determined to form their own kingdom under the rule of Jeroboam (12:1-17).

Though brought about through Rehoboam's willful determination to continue his father's mistreatment, this turn of events was from the Lord (12:15). He had previously revealed His intention to Jeroboam (11:26-39) and when Solomon learned of it, rather than humbling himself before Yahweh, he sought to put Jeroboam to death. But now that Solomon was dead, Jeroboam returned from his exile in Egypt to lead the northern tribes in their secession from David's kingdom.

When Rehoboam realized what was happening he immediately set out to recover his kingdom by force. But as he prepared his army to go out against the ten tribes, the Lord sent a prophet to warn him that this outcome was His doing (12:21-25). This fracturing of Israel was bigger than his own kingship; it was part of Yahweh's determined judgment against David's house (ref. 11:34-39, 12:18).

- b. Rehoboam had brought disaster upon his grandfather's kingdom, but so would his counterpart Jeroboam. Set in sharp contrast to the Lord's instruction and promise to him (11:29-38), the very first accomplishment of Jeroboam's reign recorded in the Kings text was his wholesale departure from the God of Israel (12:25-33).

Jeroboam knew the Law's commandment that all Israelite males were to appear before Yahweh three times a year (Exodus 23:14-17) and this meant journeying to Jerusalem and the Lord's sanctuary there. Terrified that this would result in his subjects defecting back to Rehoboam, the king determined to build new altars to Yahweh at Dan and Bethel in the north of Israel. He would ordain his own priesthood so that his subjects could now fulfill their obligation to God without leaving the boundaries of his kingdom.

This foundational act of apostasy is henceforth referred to in the Scripture as "the sin of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat" and the rule of every subsequent king of Israel would be measured against it (cf. 15:25-26, 33-34, 16:13, 18-19, 25-26, 29-31; etc.). As a defining act of high-handed defiance, Jeroboam's sin set the tone and course for the northern kingdom from that day forward; despite repeated entreaties from the Lord's prophets, no king in Israel would depart from it until the very day of His great indignation (ref. 13:1-10, 33-34; also 2 Kings 17:21-23).

The text is emphatic in presenting Jeroboam's sin as defining and determining the sub-kingdom of Israel as an apostate nation, and two things about that sin are particularly significant:

- 1) The first is that it effectively brought an end to Israel's central sanctuary. No sooner had this promise been fulfilled in the Jerusalem temple than it was overthrown by Jeroboam's altars at Dan and Bethel. Israel was to meet its covenant Father at His dwelling place – at the house where He had put His name – and the Jerusalem sanctuary was that place (ref. again 8:10-20, 9:3). Thus it didn't matter if Jeroboam dedicated his altars to Yahweh (12:28; cf. Exodus 32:4); His glory-presence didn't reside there and so Israel's worship amounted to idolatry (Deuteronomy 12:1-14).

David had sought to build a house for the Lord in fulfillment of His promise of a central sanctuary. He recognized that a permanent dwelling place for Israel's King was commensurate with the idea of an established, everlasting kingdom and this is why his desire was met with the Lord's pledges in the Davidic Covenant. The promised sanctuary had been built but the law of the central sanctuary was not being fulfilled. *This, too, highlighted the fact that the Israelite theocracy had failed to realize the kingdom promised to Abraham.*

Beyond that, Jeroboam's altars indirectly testified to the imperfection of Solomon's temple. *It could not fulfill the promise of a central sanctuary for Yahweh's people because it didn't draw all men to itself.*

- 2) Second, Jeroboam's foundational sin was the origin of the conspicuous absence of a dynasty in the northern kingdom. Jeroboam's own dynastic house was severed because of what he had done (ref. 13:33-14:11, 15:25-30), and the same pattern continued with numerous other kings of Israel. Reflecting the nation's apostate condition, intrigue, conspiracy, murder and coup marked the Israelite throne, just as it always has the kingdoms of this world (cf. 16:1-13, 21:17-22; 2 Kings 15:8-31).

The lack of a royal dynasty in Israel implied the lack of a legitimate kingship, which, in turn, indicated the illegitimacy of the northern kingdom itself. By his flagrant rebellion Jeroboam had rejected the Lord's promise of a house and kingdom (ref. again 1 Kings 11:37-38), rendering the entire historical existence of Israel (as a sub-kingdom) a matter of apostate pretense. Israel had rejected Yahweh, but it had also rejected David and his dynastic rule. Together these two things showed that Israel was not an expression of the kingdom of God.

But more than this, by fracturing David's house God had effectively put an end to the kingdom promised to Abraham – the kingdom brought to its pinnacle earthly expression under David's rule. Though the house of David continued in the southern kingdom of Judah, it did so only in a greatly diminished and weakened form.

- c. The life of the sub-kingdom of Israel was ordered around three distinct historical phases, *all of which focused on its relationship with the house of David* as manifested in the nation of Judah.

The initial phase that began with Jeroboam's reign was characterized by open and ongoing conflict between Israel and Judah; according to the Lord's word, the sword of retribution was continuing to fall upon David's theocratic house. Israel's rejection of David's house – both his dynasty and his dominion (ref. again 1 Kings 12:16) was the very foundation of its emergence as a separate nation, and from that point Jeroboam's entire reign as Israel's first king was marked by warfare between his kingdom and Rehoboam's in the south (14:30, 15:6). This enmity continued until the reign of Ahab (ref. 15:16).

Among all the kings of Israel, the Kings record affords the most narrative space to Ahab (1 Kings 16:29-22:40). The reasons for this are all associated with his unique notoriety and the impact of his reign on the northern Israelite kingdom. Ahab's reign brought Israel to the low point of its apostasy as epitomized in the influence of his wife Jezebel. A Sidonian princess who was determined to establish Baal as the chief god of her husband's kingdom, Jezebel attempted to eradicate all knowledge and worship of Yahweh in Israel. The extent to which she succeeded is indicated by Elijah's sense – at a low point in his own life – that he was the only man left in Israel who remained faithful to the Lord (ref. 19:1-18).

Elijah was uniquely important among Israel's prophets in that he served the Lord at the critical point of decision for Israel. Through the combined influences of its kings and its present queen Jezebel, Israel had reached bottom in its relationship with Yahweh. It wasn't that the nation had rejected Him entirely; it simply divided its allegiance, apportioning it to other gods believed to be capable of serving the people's well-being. At the same time, Ahab – whose reign was overtly set against Yahweh – had formed a marriage alliance with Jehoshaphat, king of Judah (cf. 2 Chronicles 18:1, 9). *In an act of profound irony, the king who had done so much to separate his kingdom from David's God had now realigned it with David's house.* This reunion marked the second phase of Israel's history.

Israel's national double-mindedness was epitomized in the political posture of its ruler, and it was this intolerable duplicity that provided the occasion for Elijah's confrontation with Israel and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (18:1-40). Israel's political reconnection with David's kingdom called for its theocratic counterpart; Israel was in need of a wholehearted return to the Lord of David's kingdom. Elijah put the nation to the test and it failed. In spite of Yahweh's visible, supernatural triumph on Mount Carmel, the northern kingdom continued to follow the course it had previously chosen. Its moment of opportunity for repentance had passed; all that remained between Israel and desolation was time.

The alliance between Ahab and Jehoshaphat also spoke to this same opportunity but, like Carmel, it, too, failed: The triumph at Carmel hadn't turned Israel back to Yahweh and neither would its reunion with the house of David. Far from drawing Israel back from its apostasy, Athaliah's marriage to Jehoram served only to further infect David's remaining kingdom with her parents' fatal disease.

In every sense this had been an unholy union (2 Chronicles 21:1-6). It pressed Judah deeper into its own apostasy and failed to prevent renewed hostilities. In this final phase Israel attempted to directly overthrow David's house and set a king of its own choosing on his throne. This was the historical setting of the Immanuel prophecy of Isaiah 7-12 by which Yahweh reaffirmed His commitment to David's house and kingdom. Ahaz, king of Judah, feared the combined threat of Israel and Aram and so formed his own alliance with the king of Assyria. But Ahaz' fears expressed a lack of faith in Yahweh and His promise to David: The principle of *Immanuel* insured that no assault on David's house would succeed (cf. 7:1-14, 8:1-10). *To the contrary, Israel's design to overthrow David's house and throne sealed its own destruction* (cf. Isaiah 8:1-7 with 2 Kings 17:1-18).

Israel's existence and history were defined by opposition to David's house. Even when it was allied with Judah, Israel effectively opposed it through its apostatizing influence. Yahweh's response was to give Israel over to destruction; while a remnant from Judah would be restored from captivity, Israel's restoration awaited the Davidic seed. In an amazing twist, this true "David" would restore Israel to Yahweh, at the same time reuniting it with Judah (cf. Hosea 1-3; Jeremiah 30-33). Much more, that reunion was to find its full glory in the reunification of the whole human race (Isaiah 11:1-13, 19:18-25).