

HISTORY OF JEWS SERIES – PROPHECY

“Rise & Fall of Northern Kingdom” (1 Kings 12)

The history of the Jewish people is a long and varied one. There are many tragic moments and terrible consequences of their own rebellion. The Lord had repeatedly warned Israel that if they turned from His Word, He would remove them from enjoying the Promised Land,

But if ye shall at all turn from following me, ye or your children, and will not keep my commandments and my statutes which I have set before you, but go and serve other gods, and worship them: Then will I cut off Israel out of the land which I have given them; and this house, which I have hallowed for my name, will I cast out of my sight; and Israel shall be a proverb and a byword among all people: And at this house, which is high, every one that passeth by it shall be astonished, and shall hiss; and they shall say, Why hath the LORD done thus unto this land, and to this house? And they shall answer, Because they forsook the LORD their God, who brought forth their fathers out of the land of Egypt, and have taken hold upon other gods, and have worshipped them, and served them: therefore hath the LORD brought upon them all this evil. (1 Kings 9:6-9)

The United Kingdom of Israel established under the reign of Saul only survived through the reigns of David and Solomon. After Solomon's death, the kingdom was divided into two, with the ten tribes (Reuben, Simeon, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, and Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) forming the kingdom of “Israel” with Samaria as their capital, and the tribes of Judah and Benjamin forming the kingdom of “Judah” with their capital at Jerusalem.

After Saul's calamitous reign, David re-established and rebuilt the kingdom. This would be the Golden Age of Israel. All of the Near East was under the control of the united tribes of Israel and ruled from Jerusalem. To secure it David put garrisons of Israeli soldiers in Damascus, Hamath, Ammon, Edom, Moab, and the out posts of the Negev and the Euphrates River. In addition, shipping in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean was under the control of Israel. So powerful was the empire of David that the strongest nations of the East, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, were eclipsed by the hegemonic power of Israel and due to Israel's political power and control this period is an empty page in the annals of those soon to be powerful nation empires.

If we do a survey of the history of great empires or civilizations it is apparent that their decline is often latent and slow, but then comes to a point of total collapse in a moment of time often as the result of a foolish action of decision made by a leader. This was indeed the case with Rehoboam in the division of the United Kingdom. However, the Providence of God was working in this moment in preserving the true remnant line that Messiah would spring from and in fulfilling a punishment decreed by God against Solomon for his idolatry (1 Kings 11:29-36).

BACKGROUND TO THE SPLIT

There was a perennial jealousy between Ephraim and Judah, the two most powerful tribes of the covenant nation, which had manifested at times into open hostilities (Judges 8:1; 2 Sam. 2:9; 19:42). On the death of Solomon, the ten tribes, headed by Ephraim, refused to do homage to Rehoboam, the son and successor of Solomon, and chose Jeroboam an Ephraimite as their king.

Although the secession of the ten tribes from the royal house of David had been ordained by God as a punishment for Solomon's idolatry; yet it was essentially a rebellion against the Lord and His promise to maintain the perpetual sovereignty of David's posterity.

After the division (c 930 B.C.), for the first sixty years the kings of Judah concentrated on trying to re-establish their authority over the kingdom of the other ten tribes, so that there was a perpetual state of war between them. In the subsequent eighty years, this hostility had ceased and for the most part, they had a cordial alliance, co-operating against their common enemies, especially against the Syrians. The kingdom of Judah maintained a separate existence from Israel for around two hundred years and occupied an area of about 8,900 km² (3,435 square miles). Following the destruction of Israel and the forced captivity migration of its inhabitants by the Assyrians (c 721 BC), Judah continued to exist for about a century and a half until its final overthrow (c 586 BC) by Nebuzar-adan, the captain of Nebuchadnezzar's body-guard (2 Kings 25:8-21). This event also saw the destruction of Solomon's Temple.

From the beginning of the kingdom of Israel, they turned aside from the worship of Jehovah as God and worshipped the golden calf. This decline soon led to outright devotion to Baal and it was truly a nation and monarchical system that was now irretrievably apostate. This apostasy also affected Judah from its establishment and many of its kings were idolaters with only a few wholly serving Jehovah. Even many of those who were followers of Jehovah, for the most part were affected to some degree by the apostasy of their day. Indeed, the kings of Judah became progressively weaker and more apostate until the patience and longsuffering of God ran out and the nation was carried off into captivity by the Babylonians and the monarchy ceased to function.

KINGDOM OF ISRAEL (c930-721 BC)

When the division of the kingdom took place about 930 B.C., only the tribe of Judah, with the chief part of Benjamin, and probably some from Dan, Simeon and other tribes, acknowledged Rehoboam as king. Jeroboam, however, ruled the largest and best portion of the land and his reign is characterized by his idolatry and unrighteous. All the other kings (nineteen in total) who followed him during the 253 years of the northern kingdom were also ungodly.

Jeroboam was a man who came to prominence initially during King Solomon's reign. We read that he was “*a mighty man of valour*” and “*industrious*” and because of this Solomon “*made him ruler over all the charge of the house of Joseph*” (1Kings 11:28). Jeroboam was from the tribe of Ephraim (1Kings 11:26), one of the most powerful tribes that was always vying for supremacy with Judah. This lineage would certainly be advantageous to his ascendancy, as Rehoboam was from their perennial rivals in Judah. The decline in the tribes of Israel was already apparent during the days of Solomon,

Because that they have forsaken me, and have worshipped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, Chemosh the god of the Moabites, and Milcom the god of the children of Ammon, and have not walked in my ways, to do *that which is right* in mine eyes, and to *keep* my statutes and my judgments, as *did* David his father (1 Kings 11:33).

So, when Jeroboam came to the throne of this new kingdom the people were already practicing the idolatry of their Canaanite neighbors. It is also notable that this rending of the

kingdom and the providential rise of Jeroboam to the throne would be a punishment from God for their apostasy. This is an important truth when studying the very different histories of the two kingdoms. God would not only use this as a providence to punish Israel but also to preserve His remnant people (mainly in Judah) and ultimately the line from which the promised Messiah would come. Jeroboam appears to be an ambitious man from the beginning and expressed no regret or patience in seizing the throne from the House of David the moment it was practicable.

Although Jeroboam was clearly talented and industrious in his responsibilities, his spiritual deficiencies quickly became apparent. In one of his first acts, Jeroboam made Shechem (between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim in northern Israel) as his new capital and set about rebuilding and fortifying it (1 Kings 12:25). This was no coincidence, as Shechem's strategic location was geographically as well as religiously significant. Its religious ties went back not only to the patriarchs but also to the Canaanites. By this action, Jeroboam was seeking to distance the people from the political influence of the kings of Judah in Jerusalem.

Not content with political and administrative separation, Jeroboam then set about altering the religious life of the new nation by framing a new Constitution for the new Kingdom. As a man of the flesh, he was not a man content to trust simply to the promise made him by God (1 Kings 11:38). He feared the fact that Israel's religious life was centered around the temple and priesthood in Jerusalem and that the requirement for all Israelite men to go there at least three times a year. This new constitution for the 10 northern tribes (which Jeroboam tried to make as similar to the old) was framed in violation of four of the greatest features of the covenant that Jehovah had made with His people. Jeroboam deliberately instituted:

- (a) A New Object of Worship.
- (b) A New Center of Worship.
- (c) A New Order of Priests.
- (d) A New Altar of Sacrifice.
- (e) A New Festal Month.

Using the reasoning of the flesh, Jeroboam devised a perverted plan, creating two golden calves for the people to worship, and strategically placed them at the northern and southern ends of the country (1 Kings 12:28-29). These calves were probably copies of the idolatry of the Egyptians (which had been accepted by their forefathers in Exodus 32), in whose land he had sojourned for some time and who worshipped their god *Apis* under the similitude of a bull or calf. Jerusalem, however, was the city that had the Temple, sacrifices, and where Jehovah was manifested among His people there and had chosen to put His name (Deut. 12:21; 1 Kings 11:13). Therefore, Jeroboam not only led Israel into the sin of setting aside the appointed object of worship; he caused them to turn their backs on the appointed place of worship.

The distinctions between the two kingdoms was further increased when Jeroboam assumed to himself the functions of the high priest and abolished the monopoly of Levi that God had ordered to the office of the priesthood and made appointments of his own from among the lowest of the people (1 Kings 12:31). As well as erecting a new altar for Israel from Judah (1 Kings 12: 32, 33), Jeroboam introduces a new festal month to mirror that of the Feast of Tabernacles that would be celebrated in Judah. Under Moses' Law the Feast of Tabernacles was to be celebrated on the 15th day of the 7th month (Lev. 23:34, 39-41). Jeroboam instituted a counter-attraction in Israel to be celebrated on the 15th day of the 8th month "*which he had devised of his own heart*" (1 Kings 12:33).

By this action, Jeroboam forsook a ritual and a worship, which had been divinely authorized, for ceremonies and services, which were wholly of his own fleshly reasoning. As he was not a prophet, he had no authority to introduce religious innovations. Jeroboam's counterfeit religion, with its own priesthood, gods and religious festivals and observances, was destined to play a major role in Israel's downfall. Under Jeroboam's rule the northern tribes soon drifted away from the pattern of religious worship God had commanded. Although, the apostasy began before the national schism (1Kings 11:30-33), it now intensified after the nation separated.

In spite of God's warnings for instituting an idolatrous form of worship as the official religion of the new kingdom, Jeroboam refused to turn from his idolatrous ways but was dialectical in his reasoning throughout much of his reign. Jeroboam, like many of the kings who followed him, never fully forsook the religion of Jehovah and, when his son was ill, he sent his wife to approach a prophet to seek guidance. The prophet warns that Jeroboam's household will be destroyed and that Israel will eventually lose control of the Promised Land because of Jeroboam's abhorrent practices. As a result, God pronounced a sobering final edict against Jeroboam (1 Kings 14:7-10). In a summary of his reign which was a legacy of tragedy that ultimately led to the total destruction on the nation the Holy Spirit said,

For he rent Israel from the house of David; and they made Jeroboam the son of Nebat king: and Jeroboam drave Israel from following the LORD, and made them sin a great sin. For the children of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they departed not from them; Until the LORD removed Israel out of his sight, as he had said by all his servants the prophets. So was Israel carried away out of their own land to Assyria unto this day. (2 Kings 17:21-23)

The Northern Kingdom of Israel had 19 kings in total and they were all ungodly. Jealousy, rivalry and murder would characterize the monarchs of this apostate nation. As we have seen, the foundation of this Kingdom was biblically distorted, so there is little wonder that the apostasy produced nothing but sin. Jeroboam's name became a synonym throughout the history of Israel for all that is evil. Indeed, it was a sufficient condemnation of any of his successors if they could be compared to him. We read 21 times during this 253-year history of the northern kingdom concerning the northern kings, "*For he walked in all the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and in his sin wherewith he made Israel to sin, to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger with their vanities*" (1 Kings 16:26, etc.). Of all the kings of Israel, one was slain, one committed suicide, and six were murdered. Not one of Israel's kings restored the true worship of God. During the 2 centuries of the existence of this kingdom, there were no less than 9 different dynasties: idolatry, immorality and bloodshed were the order of the day.

After the division of the two kingdoms, Assyria and Egypt entered into a period of rivalry as to which nation would be greatest. The might of the Assyrian Empire, which became a scourge of Israel and victimizer of Judah, would make its dominant historical appearance as a direct result of the division of Solomon's kingdom. When the division came there was then no power, as there had been, to inhibit the spread of the fiercest and most brutal conquerors yet known. The Assyrian Empire would rise after the death of Solomon and was divinely appointed by God to punish his people Israel. When that use was finished, God promised to destroy Assyria because they had not done his will by simply punishing Israel but used excessive violence, torture, and rapine. Among other cruelties, they are known to have frequently skinned their captives alive.

Northern Israel gradually lost its territories to Assyrian pressure from the northeast. Finally, Assyria invaded the northern kingdom of Israel entirely and captured the Israelites, removing them in 721 B.C. to Assyria. God indicted them in 2 Kings 7:7-23 for this captivity. It was not that the nation had disavowed all belief in Jehovah but that they tried to syncretize their allegiance to Him. This led to a compromise with the contemporary culture and habits of the nations around them (2 Kings 7:18). This judgment of God was a final and a complete one on their apostasy as these people never returned as a collective group to the land. Scattered Near-Eastern groups were eventually planted to populate their territory, worshipping their own gods. When the Assyrians took Israelites away, they brought in foreigners to tend the land and repopulate the conquered territory of the northern kingdom,

And the king of Assyria brought men from Babylon, and from Cuthah, and from Ava, and from Hamath and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel; and they possessed Samaria, and dwelt in the cities thereof (2 Kings 17:24).

Later, we learn that Sargon's grandson, Esarhaddon and his great-grandson Ashur-bani-pal also repopulated further Samaria,

And the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Asnappar brought over, and set in the cities of Samaria, and the rest *that are* on this side the river, and at such a time (Ezra 4:10).

As a result of the punishment of God for their false religion by the new settlers in Israel, the king of Assyria sent back to Bethel a priest, to teach the new inhabitants "*them how they should fear the LORD.*" However, these five transplanted nations instead of wholly turning to Jehovah simply synthesized a new religion and "*feared the LORD, and served their graven images, both their children, and their children's children: as did their fathers, so do they unto this day*" (2 Kings 17:41).

The mongrelized stock descended from those settlers is known to us in later history and in the Gospels as the Samaritans, which resulted in Galilee later being sometimes known as "Galilee of the nations," or "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Isaiah 9:1, Matthew 4:15).