

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

by Revd John Haley

SESSION SEVEN KINGDOM DIVIDED

1. Civil War

Reading: 1 Kings 11:28-33, 40, 42-43; 12:1-33

2. Northern Kingdom

The Unrighteous Kingdom

Reading: 1 Kings 14:1-20a; 16:23-26, 28-33; Amos 1:1, 4:1-5; Hosea 1:1, 8:1-6; 2 Kings 17:6-8, 16-18a, 23b

3. Elijah and Elisha

Reading: 1 Kings 17:1-6; 18:1-3, 16-46; 2 Kings 2:9b-12b; 5:1-3, 9-15

4. Southern Kingdom

The Inconsistent Kingdom

Reading: 2 Kings 16:1-4; 18:1-12; 21:1-16; Isaiah 6:1-4, 8-13; Micah 1:1, 2:3-5; 7:18; Habakkuk 1:1, 2:18-20; Jeremiah 18:1, 11-12; Zephaniah 1:1a,c, 2:1-2; 3:14-15, 17; 2 Kings 24:18a, 19-20, 25:1, 8-12

Discussion questions:

Worshipping idols was the downfall of Israel. What idols do you think people worship today?

Should God's people be saying 'prophetic' things today and if so what kind of things?

1. Civil War

Reading: 1 Kings 11:28-33, 40, 42-43; 12:1-33

The first king of Israel was Saul. His reign began quite well but, when he no longer listened to the advice he was given by Samuel (who was effectively prophet, priest and judge), his efforts to bring the northern tribes into a united kingdom of Israel failed. When Saul died, David, a member of the tribe of Judah, was acclaimed king of Judah and two years later all the tribes of Israel accepted David as their king. After a series of victorious battles against the Philistines, David made his capital at Jerusalem and brought the ark of the covenant to the tabernacle on Mount Zion.

During David's reign, Israel expanded still further from the border with Egypt and the Gulf of Aqaba to the Upper Euphrates. When David died the throne passed to his son, Solomon. During his reign, Solomon embarked on a grand building programme, including the construction of a great temple, a judgement hall and a palace for him and his chief wife, Pharaoh's daughter. The history of the temple is important but it is difficult to trace the history of the temple and to describe it because of the variety of different sources of information and because, over the years, there were three temples and the temple of the vision of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 40-43).

The first temple was erected in the reign of King Solomon and took seven years to build. It seems there were two courtyards and that in the inner courtyard was an altar for burnt offerings and beyond this stood a bronze laver for ritual washing. From the inner courtyard a flight of steps led up to the porch which was flanked by great pillars with elaborately ornamented capitals. Beyond these was an inner sanctuary with the golden incense-altar, the showbread and the five pairs of lampstands. Finally, there was an inner sanctuary containing the ark of the covenant. This temple lasted for 400 years until it was destroyed by the Babylonians (586 BC).

Zerubbabel built the second temple in about 537 BC but although it was inferior to the first temple it lasted longer. Instead of the ten lampstands it had one seven branched candelabrum but the ark of the covenant had disappeared during the Babylonian conquest. Herod the Great replaced this temple and work began in 19 BC. This magnificent structure was barely finished (AD 64) before it was destroyed by the Romans (AD 70).

Solomon's greatness betrayed him. His vast fortune and his many wives led him from the things of God, not least as he built pagan shrines for his wives to worship their pagan gods. Ahijah announced to Solomon that he had broken God's covenant, by which he held his crown, and that the kingdom would be torn away from his dynasty and given to another.

After the death of Solomon, his son, Rehoboam became king. As the reign of Rehoboam commenced, the ancient difficulties between the north and south of Israel surfaced. Jerusalem was very much in the south of the kingdom but the burden of the glories of Solomon, his extravagant court, the temple and other buildings, had fallen on the tribes of the north who least benefited from them. The people of the north resented both the heavy taxes and being pressed into labour on these great schemes.

The northern tribes sent a delegation to Rehoboam led by Jeroboam, an extremely able but unworthy man, who had previously rebelled against Solomon. Their request seems to have been reasonable enough but, against the counsel of the elders, Rehoboam followed the advice of his own contemporaries who were more disposed to say what he wanted to hear. Lacking the statesmanship to measure the situation, Rehoboam handled the delegation from the north harshly with the result that Israel broke away from the king at Jerusalem to form a separate kingdom. The Northern Kingdom, consisting of ten tribes, retained the name Israel while the Southern Kingdom, made up of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, adopted the name of Judah, the larger of the two component tribes.

2. Northern Kingdom

The Unrighteous Kingdom

Reading: 1 Kings 14:1-20a; 16:23-26, 28-33; Amos 1:1, 4:1-5; Hosea 1:1, 8:1-6; 2 Kings 17:6-8, 16-18a, 23b

The first king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam, was an unrighteous king and so was each of the 18 kings, from seven different dynasties, who followed him in the next 250 years. The life of Jeroboam cast its shadow over Israel. The kings who succeeded him are often compared to Jeroboam in their unrighteousness. 'He did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit,' becomes something of a refrain and is applied to 15 of the 18 kings who followed Jeroboam. Two of the worst were Omri and Ahab. Israel became rich and powerful and politically more important than the smaller, Southern Kingdom of Judah. At first Shechem was capital of the Northern Kingdom but from the time of Omri onwards the city of Samaria was the capital of Israel.

Despite there being a new capital in the north, Jerusalem, with the temple and the ark of the covenant, was still the focal point for the religious life of the people. Soon after the kingdom had divided, Jeroboam realised that if the people of the Northern Kingdom went to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices at the temple they would be likely to revert to the house of David and once again acknowledge the king at Jerusalem. After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves saying that these were the gods who brought Israel up out of Egypt. Rehoboam set up one golden calf idol at Bethel in the south and the other at Dan in the north of the ten-tribed kingdom, so that there was no need for the people to go to Jerusalem. He also built shrines on high places and appointed all kinds of people as priests, even though they were not Levites. The political disruption was therefore followed by a religious cleavage between the two nations.

Jeroboam's policies were continued by his successors but religious life in Israel reached an all-time low in the 22-year reign of Ahab. Recognising the commercial advantages of an alliance with the Phoenicians, Ahab married Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, daughter of the king of Tyre and priestess of Astarte. Ahab built a temple for Jezebel's god, Baal, in Samaria, which became a centre for idolatrous worship. Ahab also fostered good relations with the kingdom of Judah, securing that alliance through the marriage of his daughter, Athaliah, to Jehoram, the prince who would become the fifth king of Judah. Ahab's wrong religious ideas were matched by his false ethical dealings. In Jezreel, close to the royal palace, was a vineyard owned by a local man, Naboth. Ahab coveted this land which he wanted for a vegetable garden. When the king demanded that Naboth sell or exchange his vineyard for another piece of land, Naboth refused. As a consequence, Jezebel falsely accused Naboth of blasphemy and had him stoned to death. Ahab built a palace inlaid with ivory for himself, large building operations were undertaken in Samaria and many of the other Israelite cities were fortified.

To preach against the sinfulness of Israel, God raised up prophets, notably Elijah, Elisha, Amos and Hosea, not necessarily to predict the future but to proclaim the word of God. The prophet Amos (a Southerner from Tekoa, near Jerusalem) lived at a time when although the nation was affluent beneath the surface it was morally rotten. Amos denounced the exploitation of the poor, bribery and corruption, the extravagant luxury of the rich and syncretism (the mixing of different religions). The privileges of Israel carried with them responsibilities. Amos said that when the day of the Lord came it would be a day of judgment not vindication for Israel. Hosea's message of God's steadfast-love was learned through the unfaithfulness of his own wife whom he loved.

The kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in two stages. The tribes that settled east of the Jordan were the first to go into captivity followed, about 13 years later, by the other Israelites after the fall of Samaria (722 BC). Deportation enabled the Assyrians to put the people to work and robbed them of their ties with their homeland. The Israelites never returned and the kingdom was not restored.

3. Elijah and Elisha

Reading: 1 Kings 17:1-6; 18:1-3, 16-46; 2 Kings 2:9b-12b; 5:1-3, 9-15

The story of two notable prophets in the Northern Kingdom, Elijah and Elisha, is woven into the text of 1 and 2 Kings. Though we call these 'historical books', the Hebrew people recognised them as 'former prophets'. Religious life in Israel reached an all-time low in the 22-year reign of King Ahab and his thoroughly evil wife, Jezebel of Tyre. The corrupt worship of the Phoenician god, the Baal of these chapters, was introduced. Into this crisis situation, God sent Elijah, the greatest of all the prophets.

If Baal was worshipped as a weather-god, Elijah set himself on a collision-course with the prophets of Baal by announcing that there would be no rain for three years (1 Kings 17:1) without his say so. When Elijah and Ahab next met, Ahab called him a 'troubler of Israel' (1 Kings 18:17) but Elijah calmly informed the king that it is the king's religious policy that has caused trouble in Israel. The scene was set for a confrontation on Mount Carmel. Meanwhile, Elijah was offered refuge in Baal's own country, by a widow at Zarephath near Sidon.

After three years, Elijah returned with a challenge. If Baal was god, he should have been able to control the rain, yet there had still been no rain. Elijah therefore invited the prophets of Baal to a showdown in which they would call upon the name of Baal and he would call upon the name of Yahweh, the God of Israel, and that the God who answered by fire was the true God. Despite the spectacular demonstration of the LORD's supremacy, Baal worship was not eliminated from Israel.

To avoid the wrath of Jezebel, Elijah fled to Horeb, the sacred mountain. At the end of his life, Elijah was translated into heaven in a whirlwind bringing to a close his spectacular prophetic work.

Elijah was followed by Elisha, a young man on whom Elijah had thrown his prophet's cloak or 'mantle' (1 Kings 19:19), a symbolic act meaning that he was adopted as his son and successor in his prophet ministry. Elisha followed Elijah and served him. When Elijah knew that the end of his earthly ministry was near, he asked Elisha if he could do anything for him. In response, Elisha asked for 'a double portion of his spirit' (2 Kings 2:9), which would be the inheritance of a firstborn son.

Elisha's ministry probably lasted for more than half a century, extending over the reigns of Jehoram, Jehu, Jehoahaz and Jehoash. Elisha's ministry is an extraordinary one and even more interspersed with miracles than the fiery ministry of Elijah. His first miracle was to heal the death-giving waters of Jericho, so that what had brought death thereafter gave life. The sudden arrival of two bears that mauled the youths who were mocking him reminds us of the danger of disrespecting God's faithful servants. Moving from Jericho to the highlands of Ephraim, Elisha approached Bethel, a focus of Baal-worship and a centre for idolatry. From here he moved on through Mount Carmel to Samaria.

When Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army contracted leprosy, an Israelite slave girl told her mistress, Naaman's wife, about the prophet Elisha and how he could cure her master of his leprosy. Through the king, Naaman obtained permission to visit Elisha with great gifts, but the only word from the prophet came through a servant who told Naaman that he must dip seven times in the Jordan to be healed. Elisha refused any of the lavish presents and pronounced judgment on one of his servants who deviously obtained them for himself.

Elisha continued the great work of putting down idolatrous Baal-worship as Elijah had done before him. His work was not so much to add anything to religion, as to cleanse the religion already possessed. He did not ultimately save the nation, but he did save a large remnant.

4. Southern Kingdom

The Inconsistent Kingdom

Reading: 2 Kings 16:1-4; 18:1-12; 21:1-16; Isaiah 6:1-4, 8-13; Micah 1:1, 2:3-5; 7:18; Habakkuk 1:1, 2:18-20; Jeremiah 18:1, 11-12; Zephaniah 1:1a,c, 2:1-2; 3:14-15, 17; 2 Kings 24:18a, 19-20, 25:1, 8-12

The Israelite tribes were united in worshipping one God (Yahweh) but when, from Solomon onwards, pagan worship was tolerated, the tragic decline of the once great kingdom was inevitable. In the reign of Rehoboam, the kingdom was divided, with the northern tribes of Israel rejecting their allegiance to the dynasty of David, leaving only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin loyal to the king at Jerusalem. Under Rehoboam's son, Abijam, war broke out between the two kingdoms but later they were at peace, particularly after the marriage of Jehoram (the son of King Jehoshaphat of Judah) and Athaliah (the daughter of King Ahab of Israel). Unlike the Northern Kingdom, where the consistently wicked kings led the people into idolatry and sin, the Southern Kingdom was inconsistent. There were wicked kings such as Ahaz and Manasseh but there were also righteous, reforming kings such as Hezekiah and Josiah, who led the nation back to worshipping one, true God.

There is no doubt that having the temple at Jerusalem, the capital, helped the religious life of Judah, as a large number of priests and Levites migrated south from Israel. Despite the fact that Rehoboam was stubborn and foolish, they were loyal to the temple, the priesthood and the king. Unlike the various royal houses in the north, Judah continued to be ruled by a successor in the line of King David. Once Rehoboam's reign was firmly established he turned away from God and led the people away from God too, a trend that continued in the reign of his son, Abijam. Unlike his father and grandfather, Asa did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, removing pagan altars and poles but sadly he fell away towards the end of his reign. His son, Jehoshaphat was a godly king who took delight in the ways of the LORD.

Jehoshaphat's son, Jehoram, married Athaliah, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel and, no doubt through her influence, Baal-worship was introduced to Judah. Immediately after his father's death, Jehoram murdered all his brothers and after he died, his son, Ahaziah, became king, following in the evil ways of his maternal grandfather, Ahab of Israel. When Ahaziah died, his mother, Athaliah, seized the throne and put to death all the remaining members of the royal family of Judah (her own grandchildren) but one child, one-year-old Joash, was rescued and hidden for six years until he was revealed as the rightful King of Judah. As an adult, Joash restored Baal-worship but later he was murdered. Like his father before him, Judah's next king, Amaziah, began reasonably well but fell into idolatry. Much the same can be said of King Uzziah who, despite being faithful at the outset, was eventually overwhelmed with pride. In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah was commissioned as the LORD's prophet. King Jotham lived faithfully but despite his godly example the nation acted corruptly. However, his son, Ahaz, was a zealous idolater and even offered some of his children in the fire to the Baal-god Moloch. Ignoring the words of the prophet, Isaiah, Ahaz refused to trust in God and eventually suspended public worship at the temple, a low point in Judah's history.

Hezekiah, son of wicked Ahaz, was one of Judah's best kings. When Judah was threatened by Assyria, he listened to the statesman-prophet Isaiah and Judah was delivered. During his reign, the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria. Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, was the complete opposite of his father, practising child-sacrifice to Moloch as Ahaz had done. Although Manasseh later repented, his son, Amon, who reigned for two years, was no better than his father had been but the next king, Josiah, was exceptionally good and successfully reformed the nation. Josiah was succeeded by four unrighteous kings, Jehoahaz, Jehoikim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah.

After 400 years Judah's sins caught up with her and God's judgment, foretold by Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah and Jeremiah warned, was brought upon the inconsistent kingdom through the nation of Babylon. Babylon had already conquered Assyria and the Babylonians gathered all the leaders, artisans, musicians, and promising children and carried them away to captivity in Babylonia (587 BC). Yet, contained in the word of the prophets is a message of hope.

The Kings of Israel and Judah

United Kingdom of Israel

Northern Kingdom of Israel

Southern Kingdom of Judah

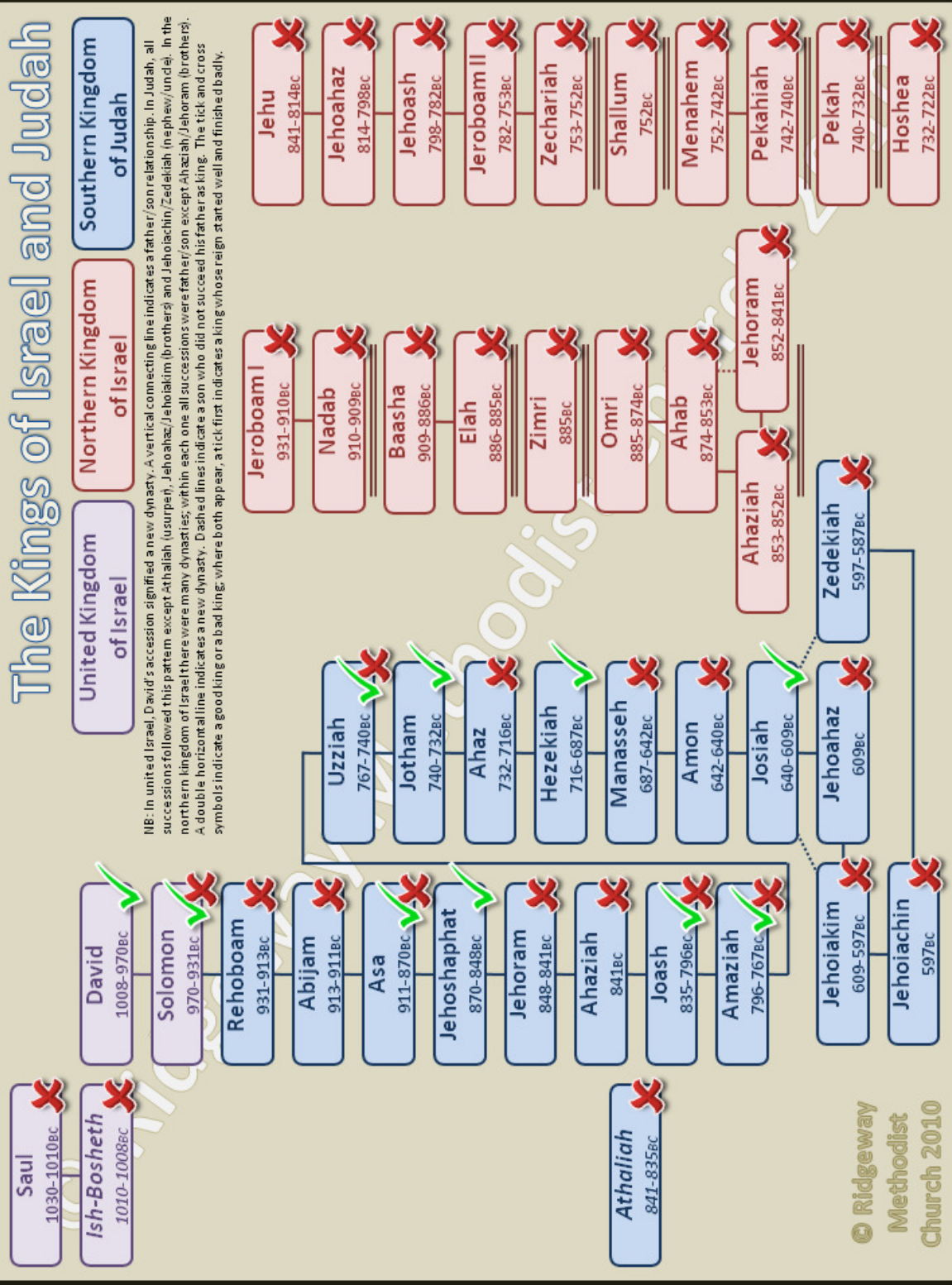


FIG: In united Israel, David's accession signified a new dynasty. A vertical connecting line indicates a father/son relationship. In Judah, all successions followed this pattern except Athaliah (usurper), Jehoahaz/Jehoiakim (brothers) and Jehoichin/Zedekiah (nephew/uncle). In the northern kingdom of Israel there were many dynasties, within each one all successions were father/son except Ahaziah/Jehoram (brothers). A double horizontal line indicates a new dynasty. Dashed lines indicate a son who did not succeed his father as king. The tick and cross symbols indicate a good king or a bad king, where both appear, a tick first indicates a king whose reign started well and finished badly.