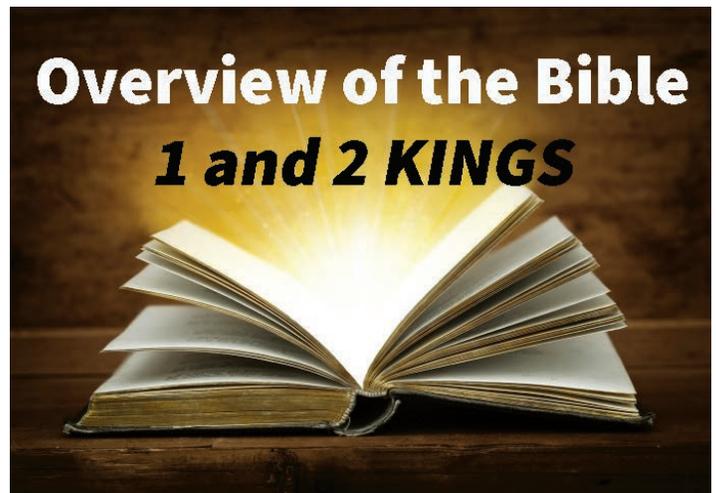


THE TWO KINGDOMS

1 Kings 12:1–14:33
Lesson 99

Wednesday, August 24, 2022



12:1–14:31 The Birth of the Two Kingdoms

12:1–24 The kingdom divides. It would appear that Rehoboam had to be acclaimed king separately by the northern tribes before his accession ceremonies were complete. In this he was following a pattern established by David, who initially became king over Judah (2 Sa. 2:4) and was later made king over Israel (2 Sa. 5:3). We are reminded that neither David nor Solomon had tried to weld Judah and Israel into a single entity (see above on 4:20). Solomon presumably went through a similar process of being acclaimed by Israel, although there is no mention of it. By Rehoboam's day Shechem, in the heart of the northern hill country, was the location for the event.

The kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

The northern tribes required Rehoboam to meet a condition before they would accept him as their king. They also had an alternative ruler available in the person of Jeroboam, recalled from Egypt after the death of Solomon. We learn that under Solomon the northern tribes had suffered *a heavy yoke and harsh labour* (4). (We previously noted various clues that this had been the case, and here we find it confirmed by Israel's spokesmen.) Israel would serve Rehoboam only if he agreed to lift this burden.

At first Rehoboam seems to act prudently. He makes no immediate response but takes three days to consult his advisors. The older men, who have served Solomon, advise Rehoboam to concede to the people's demand. However, the men of Rehoboam's own generation give different advice, namely that he should meet the people's demand with the threat of even harsher treatment. The Hebrew word describing these *young men* (8, 10, 14) actually means 'young boys' or even 'children'; in the writer's view they deserve this description because their advice is so naive. And it is these 'children' whose counsel Rehoboam chooses to follow. By rejecting the advice of the older men who have served Solomon, Rehoboam turns his back on the last repository of Solomon's wisdom and embraced folly. The fate of the kingdom is sealed.

Rehoboam's tough, confrontational style was a show of strength which concealed weakness. Solomon's wisdom had had lapses, but Rehoboam displayed no wisdom at all. His attempt to regain the initiative was hopelessly mishandled, and Israel slipped from his grasp. The rallying cry which Israel had used during its abortive rebellion against David (2 Sa. 20:1) was flung in his face (16).

Whether *Adoniram* (18) was sent to negotiate further or to use force is not clear, but placing affairs in the hands of the man who was in charge of forced labour was at best a highly provocative act. Not surprisingly, it resulted in Adoniram's death. Jeroboam, meanwhile, was made king over Israel (20).

Returning hastily to Jerusalem, Rehoboam raised an army out of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin and prepared to wage war. However, the prophet *Shemaiah* put a stop to the venture, bringing a word from God that forbade him to act (22–24). It was God himself who had separated Israel from Judah and, for the moment at least, it had his protection.

The narrative thus weaves together the human and divine dimensions of the drama. Rehoboam had acted stupidly and followed bad advice, and Israel was *in rebellion against the house of David* (19); but the ultimate explanation is that Yahweh stood behind the scenes directing events. *So, the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from the LORD, to fulfil the word the LORD had spoken ...* (15). Human beings have the freedom to be obedient or disobedient, to act wisely or foolishly, but this freedom is contained within God's sovereignty. In particular, the writer stresses many times that events announced by God through his prophets always come about.

12:25–32 The error of Jeroboam. Jeroboam established his new kingdom in two ways. First, he strengthened two key cities, Shechem and Peniel (the latter to provide him with an administrative and defensive center east of the Jordan). Secondly, he reorganized the worship life of Israel. His arrangements were motivated by a fear that if the people made regular visits to the temple in Jerusalem their loyalty would revert to Rehoboam. To forestall this, he created alternative cultic centers within Israel, one at Dan and one at Bethel, marking the northern and southern limits of the kingdom. His fear showed a lack of trust in the promise of God given through Ahijah, that if he remained obedient God would establish for him an everlasting dynasty (11:37–38).

Jeroboam was, however, guilty of more than a failure to trust. The golden calves which he set up at Bethel and Dan led the people into idolatry (28–30). It is impossible to reconstruct Jeroboam's real intention in setting up these images. In the art of the ancient Near East it was not unusual for a deity to be portrayed standing on the back of a bull. It is therefore possible that Jeroboam intended the golden calves to represent the place where Yahweh was enthroned, and that he never wished them to become objects of worship themselves. (In the same way, the cherubim in Solomon's temple were meant to signify the place where God was present; see above on 8:3–13.) His words in v 28 are as ambiguous as the calves themselves, for they can either be translated *Here are your gods ...* or 'Here is your God ...'. But whatever Jeroboam's original intentions, the writer reports everything in the light of the fact that *this thing became a sin*. Therefore, we are surely meant to see a connection between Jeroboam's words in v. 28 and the invitation to worship the golden calf at Sinai in Ex. 32:4.

12:33–13:10 The visit of a man of God from Judah. Among Jeroboam's cultic reforms was the creation of a festival in the eighth month *like the festival held in Judah* (12:32), which probably means it was Israel's version of the Feast of Tabernacles, celebrated in the seventh month (Lv. 23:33–43). While Jeroboam may have been deliberately setting out to give Israel distinctive religious traditions, there may also have been a practical reason for the later date. The Feast of Tabernacles was meant to begin when the summer harvest was completed (Lv. 23:39), and this would have been later in Israel than in Judah because of slight differences in terrain and climate.

The arrival of an anonymous man of God from Judah took place while Jeroboam was instituting this festival with sacrifices at Bethel. However, the prophet's words were not against the festival but against Bethel's altar. There is not even a word of condemnation for the golden calf; perhaps it had yet to acquire its overtones of idolatry. The reason for the prophet's mission was simply that the shrine existed at all as an alternative to the temple in Jerusalem.

Bethel was a place with ancient associations in Israel's history (see Gn. 28) and became the more popular and important of Jeroboam's two shrines. But the prophet declared that worship at Bethel's altar would come to a violent end at the hands of one *Josiah*, a future member of David's dynasty. This prophecy was not to be fulfilled for over three centuries; then Josiah finally removed every trace of illegitimate and idolatrous worship throughout the territories of Israel and Judah. In short, the prophecy gives us a glimpse of the end of the affair, even as Israel's sad decline was beginning.

Confirmation of the truth of the prophecy was given instantly when the altar split and spilled its ashes. Jeroboam, pulled up short by this and the sudden withering of his arm, asked for the prophet's intercessions, and his health was restored. Jeroboam seems to have been profoundly affected by this demonstration of God's power over life and death and offered the man of God hospitality; but, in obedience to God's instructions, the prophet refused it in very strong terms. Was it to illustrate God's disapproval of what was being done in Israel that his servant was not allowed to eat or drink there? That is a possible reason, but an even more attractive explanation is that his resolute obedience was to be a further sign to the king, a reminder of the obedience that should have characterized his own life and reign.

13:11–34 The death of the man of God. The story of the man of God takes an unexpected turn with the appearance of the old prophet of Bethel. On hearing of events at the altar the prophet from Bethel made his own offer of hospitality, which was at first refused on the same grounds as before. But this prophet was determined that the man of God would spend time under his roof (we are not told why) and resorted to lying to persuade him to do so. He claimed that God had spoken to him and countermanded his earlier instructions.

The story gives us no reason to think that the prophet of Bethel was one of those who regularly ‘prophecy lies’, proclaiming their own fantasies instead of faithfully reporting the word of God (*cf.* Je. 23:16; 27:9–16). Indeed, this prophet received and delivered a genuine word from God in vs. 20–22. In short, he is simply portrayed as a prophet who told a lie. But it was a lie which cost the man of God his life. The old prophet announced the death which would befall him as a result of his disobedience and his words were quickly fulfilled. The prophet of Bethel was then contrite and gave his own backing to the message of the man of God concerning the altar.

What are we to make of this strange and shocking story? We see a prophet delivering a word which was a lie, and another prophet believing it in spite of the instructions God had previously given him. On one level, the story clearly illustrates the difficulty which is sometimes involved in discerning the true word of God. On another level, it underscores the importance of unswerving obedience. In this connection the man of God continued to be a sign to Jeroboam and to Israel; for his tragic end was a warning that disobedience could lead to death—the death of the whole nation. On a third level, the story shows that prophecy is irrevocable; the word of God has creative power, shaping events and moving them towards its fulfilment. This is the lesson learned by the prophet of Bethel (32).

The lesson was, however, not learned by Jeroboam. Events had shown beyond doubt that the altar at Bethel existed in defiance of God’s will, but Jeroboam persisted in his sin (33), a sin which would eventually lead to Israel’s total destruction (34).

14:1–20 Jeroboam and the prophet Ahijah. We learn here for the first time that Jeroboam had a wife and sons, and that his royal residence was at Tirzah (17), about 6 miles (10 km) north-east of Shechem.

To discover what would be the outcome of an illness afflicting one of his sons, Jeroboam sent his wife to Ahijah the prophet with a gift. It seems to have been quite normal for people to consult a prophet when desiring information and to pay for his services (*cf.* 1 Sa. 9:3–9). Jeroboam’s wife was, therefore, not doing anything out of the ordinary and it is not clear why she needed a disguise for her journey to Shiloh. If it was meant to deceive Ahijah the stratagem was useless, partly because the old man could no longer see, but chiefly because God had told him in advance who was coming and why! In the context of the story the motive for the disguise is not so important as the fact that a blind prophet could ‘see through it’. Here, as in the previous chapter, we discover that God’s prophets are not to be trifled with.

Ahijah had a word from God for Jeroboam, and he delivered it before his visitor even had a chance to speak. Like David, Jeroboam had been raised up by God *from among the people* to be their *leader* (7) and, like David, he received a kingdom which formerly belonged to someone else (8); but there the comparison ends. Unlike David, he had not followed Yahweh with his whole heart. Indeed, he had done great evil, ignoring Yahweh (*you have ... thrust me behind your back*) and leading the people into idolatry (9).

So much for the verdict. The sentence follows and has four parts to it. First, all the males of Jeroboam’s family would be wiped out. The promise of an enduring dynasty was conditional (11:38) and was now revoked in terrifying terms. Secondly, the son who was sick would die. He alone of Jeroboam’s sons would receive a proper burial and mourning because God had found some good in him. It is profoundly ironic that the only glimmer of light in this otherwise dark prophecy comes in the prediction of this son’s death. Thirdly, God would raise up a new king for Israel who would execute judgment on Jeroboam’s household. And finally, Israel as a whole was ultimately doomed because of the seeds of idolatry which Jeroboam had sown. The nation would be scattered in lands *beyond the river* (*i.e.* the Euphrates) and thus would cease to exist. (For the reference to *Asherah poles* in v 16, see below on vs 22–24.)

Ahijah’s prophecy provides a sad picture of ruined potential. As the first king of an independent Israel, Jeroboam had the God-given opportunity to be a ruler of great stature; instead, he was responsible for setting his kingdom on the road to disaster. The discrepancy between potential and performance is a recurring theme of the books of Kings.

Jeroboam's wife returned to Tirzah with the answer to her unspoken question—and much more. As soon as she got home the prophecy concerning the sick son was fulfilled. The previous chapter has left no room for doubt that the fulfilment of the rest will follow. The nation's doom, thus pronounced, was now certain. But we know it will not happen immediately, for Ahijah had mentioned a new king who would arise to put an end to Jeroboam's house (14a; the rest of this verse is unfortunately very obscure). In other words, the end of Jeroboam's dynasty and the end of Israel are two different things.

The notice of Jeroboam's death (19–20, providing a source for further information, length of reign and name of successor) follows a concluding formula typical of 1 and 2 Kings, except that the length of reign is normally noted at the beginning of a reign rather than the end. The same variation occurs in the case of Solomon (11:42) and probably for the same reason: in both cases the succession was not straightforward, and the account left no place for the standard formula at the beginning of the reign.

14:21–31 Summary of Rehoboam's reign. Although we have already encountered Rehoboam in ch. 12, the real focus of that narrative was the transfer of Israel to Jeroboam. The writer now returns to Rehoboam to deal with his reign separately and so introduces him with a formula which is more or less characteristic from now on (21).

From this introduction we learn that Rehoboam was forty-one when he responded so foolishly to the demands of the northerners of Shechem. His rash advisors, who are said to have 'grown up with him' (12:8), were presumably about the same age. This confirms that the description of them as 'young men' (or 'young boys') is a comment on the quality of their advice and not on their real age (see above on 12:8).

We also learn that Rehoboam's mother was an Ammonitess, one of Solomon's foreign wives. It is surprising that Solomon's successor was not a son of Pharaoh's daughter, who seems to have been his chief wife (see above on 7:8). Perhaps she bore him no sons (or none who survived). Or it may be that, as in the case of Adonijah and Solomon, the normal rules of succession were overridden. A reason for this might lie in a changed relationship with Egypt, caused when Shishak became king and gave asylum to Jeroboam (11:40).

Vs. 22–24 reveal the religious situation in Judah to have been every bit as bad as in Israel. Under Rehoboam there was a proliferation of *high places*, *sacred stones* and *Asherah poles*. This last expression (lit. 'Asherim' as in the RSV) refers to some kind of image, probably wooden, of the Canaanite goddess Asherah. They were nothing new among the Israelites, for the tendency to worship Canaanite deities had been a feature of the Judges' period (Jdg. 3:7).

The only difference between the situations in Israel and Judah was that Rehoboam (unlike Jeroboam) was not condemned for being personally involved in the idolatrous practices. Nevertheless, the narrating of Shishak's invasion (25–28) immediately after this catalogue of evils is surely significant. The clear implication is that the Egyptian campaign was God's chastisement for Judah, and particularly for Rehoboam, for it struck at the very heart of his kingdom—the temple and the royal palace. The king did not have to be an idolater himself to be held responsible for the idolatry of his people. It was enough that he had not checked the spiritual decline of the kingdom. (See further on 15:3 below.)

Shoshenq I (Shishak) had a relief scene carved on the wall of the temple of Amun at Thebes recording his campaign into Palestine. From this it is evident that he did not simply invade Judah but Israel as well. However, the writer of Kings ignores the effect this campaign must have had on Jeroboam's kingdom and focuses on the losses sustained by Judah. The treasuries of the temple and the palace were both plundered. The account specifically mentions the loss of *the gold shields* Solomon had made (200 large ones and 300 smaller ones according to 10:16–17) and their replacement with bronze copies by Rehoboam. The decline of the house of David is neatly epitomized here. Rehoboam, ruling a reduced kingdom which was easy prey for Egypt, could only afford bronze where Solomon had used gold. Size, security and wealth were all greatly diminished.¹

¹ John J. Bimson, "1 and 2 Kings," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 351–357.