

Chapter 6
Two Kingdoms Where One Stood Before:
Israel and Judah

The revolt that split the kingdom centered around a man named Jeroboam. A member of one of the ten northern tribes, Jeroboam had taken leadership against Solomon in an earlier dispute that had pitted north against south in Israel. The issue had arisen in 950 B.C., the year a new Pharaoh, Shishak, had assumed the throne of Egypt. One of Shishak's aims had been to extend Egyptian rule back into Canaan, where it had been many centuries before. Solomon had begun to feel the pressure from Egypt building on the southern border of Israel, but to his dismay he had discovered that his southern fortifications were in disarray. He had set to rebuilding them, but he had put so much of Israel's resources into the construction projects in the city of Jerusalem that he had drained his treasury. He then made a desperate move. He sold some of his northern properties to other kings in order to raise the money he needed to repair the defenses. The elders of the ten northern tribes considered the sale to be unauthorized, an act of confiscation really, and they had been infuriated by it. They had been further alienated when at the same time Solomon had sent his tax collectors to the north to raise money to rebuild the southern fortresses. To make matters worse, Solomon had also sent his conscription officers into the northern tribal areas to secure laborers for his corvees. Corvees, gangs of workmen raised by force and kept in line by the whip, had to do the actual work of building the fortifications; and service in these gangs was a form of slavery degrading to the free Israelite who deeply resented being taken from land and clan to do the king's hard labor. As if all this were not enough, the northern elders felt that their own boundaries were being left unprotected from the rising Syrian power, and they had become fearful for the safety of their homes and towns. It was quite a bill of particulars the northern elders had been able to draw up against Solomon and his government. Jeroboam had been one of the leaders in expressing discontent against Solomon; and when Solomon had moved to put down the incipient rebellion, Jeroboam had had to flee to Egypt for his life.

When Solomon died, Rehoboam, his son and designated heir lay claim to his father's throne. The people of Judah did not dispute his claim, and he was acclaimed king over Judah. He then took his retinue of southern officers and administrators to Shechem for a meeting with the elders of the north to see if he would be acceptable to them as king.

Instead of accepting Rehoboam as their rightful king, these tribesmen demanded redress for their legitimate claims. Rehoboam was placed in a classic bind. If he continued the policies

of his father, he would alienate the disgruntled north. If he accommodated his policies to meet their demands, he would open the south to Egyptian attack. He called a council of his advisors to give him direction.

His older councillors advised caution, but the younger princes counseled a hard line: " Show them who the king is," they said. Rehoboam accepted their advice and announced his decision to the men of the north: he would rule, and on his own terms.

The result was electric. The northerners denounced their relationship with Judah and the house of David and set in motion the processes of selecting another ruler satisfactory to them. Rehoboam, convinced that all he needed to do to terminate the uprising was to make a show of force, sent out his deputy Adoram to raise another corvee from the northern tribes. Adoram was seized and stoned to death, and Rehoboam, the dynastic son of David, mounted his chariot and fled in terror to Jerusalem. The northern tribes called Jeroboam from Egypt to their assembly and made him king over the ten tribes of Israel. The tribes of Judah and Benjamin alone followed the house of David.

This story, told in detail, brings to light a number of matters important to biblical history.

One is that the northern tribes would not automatically accept as their new king the designated son of the late king; in other words, their form of government was not to be dynastic. Governance in these northern tribes had always been charismatic, that is, based on ability and acceptability, and in refusing the kingship of Rehoboam they were affirming their own historic tradition of government.

It was a commendable principle and had provided good leadership in Israel in the two centuries before David became king. But it now meant that Israel (the northern ten tribes continued to carry that name as their own until the nation ceased to exist in 722) had a built-in instability in its government. If rule could change hands at the death of every king, a number of claimants to kingship would present themselves at each opportunity. And if someone wanted badly to assume rule in Israel, the incumbent king could become subject to early and violent removal.

In Judah a lasting dynasty did develop. (After the division in 922, the southern kingdom took the name of Judah, the name of its leading tribe.) Descendants of David stayed on the throne at Jerusalem until the city was destroyed in 586. Even after that date, Judah nourished the hope that a son of David would again ascend the throne and restore Judah to its former prominence among the nations, a hope later to emerge in Christian thinking

as a longing for a Messiah who was son of David.

Second, Judah possessed all the sacred machinery of religion: they had the ark of the covenant, the Temple, the priesthood and the holy city. If Israel was in any way to claim legitimacy as the inheritor of the legacy of the united kingdom, it would have to construct for itself at least a temple, a priesthood, and holy shrines.

Jeroboam set himself to that task. He built a shrine to Yahweh at Dan, on the northern edge of his nation, and another at Bethel, on the southern edge; rebuilt them, rather, for each had been shrines for centuries before, so Jeroboam thought of himself as simply restoring them to their former function. He established a priesthood that claimed to come from Moses. He instituted an annual thanksgiving service to challenge the one sponsored by Jerusalem. By these acts, he and his advisors managed to keep the people's loyalties turned away from Jerusalem and centered in the life of the ten northern tribes.

The history we now trace covers just a little more than two hundred years: 925 to 722 B.C. There are three major components to this history: what happened in Israel, what happened in Judah, and what was happening on the polar edges of the Fertile Crescent to influence these two small kingdoms.

Israel first.

Jeroboam was made king in 925, and he ruled until 901. We have already previewed his task: to set up a kingdom that could claim to be the rightful heir to the united Kingdom of Israel and to undergird this with a religion consonant with that of David and Solomon. He had some success, enough that four more kings of his line were able to hold rule until they were replaced by the military leader Omri.

The Bible, for reasons to be discussed later, has nothing good to say about Omri, but his contemporaries considered him to be a ruler of power and vision. Power: he pushed the borders of Israel out to where they had been in the great days of Solomon. He kept the Syrians at bay. He grabbed the Transjordan for himself. He made treaties with the Judahites and the Phoenicians. He made Israel once more a force to be reckoned with in the Mideast; for generations after his death, this kingdom was known to other nations as "the House of Omri." And vision: he built a capital city for the nation at Samaria. The city was not large by our standards; its dimensions measured only 1300 by 630 feet. But it was a delight; mountains surrounded it, and fertile fields, and beyond was the blue and beautiful Mediterranean Sea. It

was a city of masonry, and ivory, and Greek- like pillars. It told of a land of wealth. It was also a site that armies could easily defend, and fortifications were built into it.

Omri ruled for only a short period and was succeeded by his son, Ahab, who came to stand for all that was evil in Israelite life. His wife, Jezebel, a native of Sidon, brought alien influences into the worship of God centering around the Canaanite Baal, and introducing alien moral practitioners into the behavior-patterns of Israel; under these foreign religious and ethical influences Israelites were again enslaved and their lands confiscated. Ahab died in a frightful coup in 850. His son and successor, Jehoram, met a similar fate almost a decade later, and in the massacres that accompanied his death all of Ahab's sons were slain. The House of Omri had ruled Israel for only thirty-five years.

Jehu, an army general who took power in 842, succeeded to the **throne in another coup that**, by even the most generous of standards, has to be called vicious. It began when, in battle, Jehu shot and killed King Jehoram of Israel. He immediately went to the house of the Queen Mother, Jezebel, and had her thrown to her death from a second story window. He gathered into a single room the seventy sons of Ahab, some of them merely children, decapitated them, and left their heads by the city gate of Samaria. He found forty-two followers of Amaziah of Judah, Jehoram's ally, and cast them into a pit. None survived. He gathered together the priests of the pagan temples and had them executed. He returned to Samaria and utterly destroyed every remnant of the rule of Ahab. This activity was so vicious that no one can justify it; but in the cruel morality of the times, people accepted it as a "cherem," an extermination of all the opponents of one's God and religion, and they applauded the result: the cult of Baal was destroyed, and Yahweh stood alone as the God of Israel.

Despite Jehu's long rule, the forces of decay were active in Israel. Her leadership had been decimated and she could not reverse the political and economic damage done to her. Her enemies were soon attacking her, and she could not defend herself properly. The forty years of Jehu were not productive years for Israel.

It was Jeroboam II, in 786, following the reign of Jehu's sons, who began to rebuild the kingdom. He extended its borders to the boundaries they had had under Solomon and introduced a new time of prosperity; during his reign the commercial and colonial activity of the Phoenicians was at a peak, and Israel shared in the profits. But it was a time of exploitation, too. The higher the living standard of the royal and mercantile classes rose, the lower the peasants were ground into poverty. It was almost as if Israel had gone full circle

in this two century period: at its end, Israel had again become what it had been in the time of Solomon: strong, wealthy, exploitative, believing it would endure forever.

It did not. Before we go to the unhappy climax of the story, however, we have to consider what was happening in Judah and in other parts of the Fertile Crescent. Next then, Judah.

Judah's history in this two-century period was not nearly as dramatic as that of Israel, and this was so primarily because of its geography: the great trade routes between Egypt and Mesopotamia passed directly through the Kingdom of Israel, but Judah was off in the mountains to the east. Her relative isolation meant that foreign powers tended to leave her alone; there was no particular need to challenge the mountain strongholds around Jerusalem; this saved Judah from much of the military adventurisms of Israel. Judah did not have the economic growth that Israel had; society in Judah had neither the wealth of Israel nor its poverty-stricken masses. Religious practices were not as open to foreign influences: Yahweh was Judah's supreme God, its only God; archaeologists working in Israel find almost as many names compounded with "Baal" as with 'Yahweh," but to date Judah has yielded no such names, an indication that she was not subject to the religious competition that caused such trouble for her northern neighbor. All this led to stability of government; a descendant of David was on the throne of Judah during each of these two hundred years.

Rehoboam was Judah's first king. When his father's empire divided, he made no real attempt to restore it. Most of his army and much of the wealth of the nation was in the north anyway, and he could not command the loyalty of people in that area. Furthermore, he had to fight back an invasion from Egypt, and that exhausted his available resources. After Rehoboam, Asa was the next important king to reign (913-873). His reign was a cooling-off period (nations need these!) in which Judah had an opportunity to work out its own religious, social, and political identity. Jehoshaphat (873-849), a just and able king, followed Asa. He was the first to institute long-needed judicial reform, setting up a system of royally-appointed judges in key outlying cities to deal with legal matters; he also set up a court of appeals in Jerusalem. He made the mistake, however, of allying himself too closely with Omri's international ventures; and when Jehu attacked the house of Omri, the fall-out from the coup precipitated the worst internal crisis in Judah's history to date. In the near-anarchy that resulted, all the descendants of David were assassinated, except the little child Joash. It was only through the courage and cunning of his aunt and his nurse that the child's life was saved - for six years these two daring women protected him from the onslaught of his rapacious grandmother Athaliah - and in due time he was elevated to the throne, thus preserving the line of David in Judah. After thirty-seven years as king he was assassinated by his subjects, and his son Amaziah succeeded him. This man actually saw Jerusalem captured by Israel. Following his humiliating defeat, he was permitted by Israel to sit on his stripped throne; but once assassination became a way of

political life, it carried on, and Amaziah met this same fate. His son Uzziah (783-742) reigned in his place. Uzziah was a very able king who brought Judah a period of prosperity that rivaled that which Israel was enjoying at the same time under Jeroboam II. Uzziah rebuilt Jerusalem, he sent his armies across the trade routes of the seacoast plains to the west and opened up a seaport on the Mediterranean for trade, he extended his empire into the Negeb desert. Judah under Uzziah, like Israel under Jeroboam II, enjoyed a period of stability and security, the like of which neither kingdom was ever again to experience.

The reason this was so had to do with events in the other nations of the Fertile Crescent. Three nations affected the life of Israel-Judah during these two hundred years.

The first to make an impact on Canaan was Egypt, which had been relatively quiescent for the three hundred years between the exodus under Moses and the death of Solomon. But Shishak sought to re-establish Egypt's power in Canaan and the rest of the Middle East, and he made it possible for Jeroboam to return to Israel to disrupt matters there; it does not take much imagination to think of him as pleased with the resultant division of Israel. He followed this up with a full-scale attack upon the newly-divided nation, taking one hundred and fifty cities from the two little kingdoms. But Egypt was too weak internally to take full advantage of these victories, so Shishak was forced to retire to his delta and to his dreams. In the time of Judah's Asa, Egypt pushed north again, but Asa was strong enough to turn back the challenge. With that mediocre attempt, Egypt's meddling in Canaanite affairs ended and did not resume during the time under consideration.

Action on the international scene then shifted northeast to Syria and Damascus. Under Benhadad (880-842), Damascus began to assume the dominant position in Syria and Canaan. Sometimes an adversary of Israel, sometimes allied with it, Syria continued to put pressure on her southern and western neighbors. By 800 Israel under Jehoahaz was reduced to being little more than a vassal of Syria. Power was moving north and east along the Fertile Crescent, and a quick look at the map will indicate what this means. First Israel under David-Solomon was the dominant kingdom; now it was Syria under Benhadad and his successors that was acceding to this power.

But this power was about to take another dramatic leap further north and east, and this time it would center itself in Assyria. The Assyrian empire dated back a long time in history; it could possibly locate its founding as early as 2000 B.C. At the time of David, Assyria was at the nadir of its power, but as David's state fell apart, Assyrian power began to grow. Assurnasir-pal III (883-859) began military conquests, and he introduced something totally new into international relations; he and his successors in Assyria made fear and brutality an instrument of state. These kings developed armies of foot soldiers that numbered into the hundreds of thousands, to which were added thousands of chariots and ranks of archers, and **Assyrian military successes were marked with artillery barrages of arrows**, devastating in their effects upon opposing armies. These brutal armies were the external indications of a brutal frame of mind. Assurnasir-pal was to boast of one of his exploits: "I have cut off their heads. I burned them with fire. The city I destroyed, I turned it into mounds and ruins. The young men

and maidens in the fire I burned." One scene on a palace relief in Assur shows Assurnasipal, another Assyrian ruler, and his queen dining together while the severed head of the king of Elam dangles above them. It was this brutal power that was now to be let loose upon the world.

Assurnasipal and his armies moved through the valleys of the Tigris and the Euphrates all the way to the Mediterranean, and city after city fell under this awesome strength. The king retired to his own borders, but under Shalmaneser III (859-824) Assyria returned, only to be met by a coalition of Syrian and Canaanite armies at Qarqar in 853 and turned back. Around 800 Assyria turned west again, but once again her king had to return to take care of internal affairs. Then, in 745, Tiglath-Pileser III became ruler in Assyria.

It was a fateful moment for Israel and Judah. They had each lost their most able kings at almost the same time Tiglath came to the throne: Jeroboam II died in 746 and Uzziah in 742. Assyria was definitely on the move, and she was again introducing something new into world affairs. Instead of being satisfied with receiving tribute from native kings and conducting reprisals against their cities if necessary, Assyria began to deport rebels and incorporate their lands as provinces into its own empire. This was to bode ill indeed for Israel.

Once more Assyria came down the battle route of old: through the Tigris-Euphrates valleys toward the sea and south. Once more Syria and Canaan gathered forces to stop her. This time it did not work. Assyria destroyed Gath. It ravaged Damascus. It overran Transjordan and Galilee. It made a vassal of Israel. When Tiglath died and was replaced first by Shalmaneser IV and then Sargon II in 722. Israel rebelled. Sargon moved in upon the capital of Samaria. His own inscription tells of his conquest:

I beseiged and conquered Samaria, led away as booty 27,290 inhabitants of it. I formed from among them a contingent of fifty chariots and made the remaining inhabitants assume their (social) positions. I installed over them an officer of mine and imposed upon them the tribute of a former king.

With that defeat, Israel's corporate life ended. Its leading inhabitants, those who were not killed, were resettled in Upper Mesopotamia; we never hear of them again. Other peoples from distant parts of the empire - from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim - were resettled in the city of Samaria. Disaster was complete. Remember the date: 722 B.C, the destruction of Samaria, the end of the life of the nation Israel.

