

The Downfall of David's House – The Northern Kingdom of Israel

I. Introduction

1. Solomon was Yahweh's choice to succeed David as king, yet he failed his God and His people, alienating them by harsh treatment, which his son Rehoboam only amplified.
2. This exploitation was the historical basis for the secession of the northern ten tribes, but as the outworking of the Lord's sword against David's house. * 1 Kings 11-12
3. David united the twelve tribes, but his failure as king – perpetuated in Solomon – ended that unity. Under his grandson, David's kingdom was reduced to two tribes, and its final downfall would endure until his house was "raised up" by the promised covenant son. * Jer. 30-33

II. The Decline/Demise of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 11 – 2 Kings 18)

A. The Sin of Jeroboam – The Pattern for the Northern Kingdom

The unfaithfulness of the Davidic kingship caused Yahweh to deliver ten tribes to the Ephraimite Jeroboam (Jeroboam I, son of Nebat) *with the same charge and promise regarding faithful rule over His people* (ref. 1 Kings 11:28-38). But despite this privilege, high calling and promise, Jeroboam quickly departed from the Lord for the sake of his own power and dominion.

1. The covenant required all Israelites to appear before Yahweh three times a year (Exod. 23:14-17), and this meant journeying to Jerusalem. Fearful that this would lead his subjects back to Rehoboam, Jeroboam commissioned altars to be built at Dan and Bethel and appointed his own priesthood to minister there. Thus he directed the people of Israel to fulfill their covenant obligation without leaving the boundaries of his kingdom. * 1 Kings 12:25ff
2. The Scripture refers to this foundational apostasy as "*the sin of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat,*" and it became the standard for assessing every subsequent king of Israel (cf. 1 Kings 15:25-34, 16:13-19, 25-26, 29-31, 21:51-52; 2 Kings 3:1-3, 13:1-2, etc.). *Jeroboam's sin was the benchmark for his successors and they uniformly followed and promoted his example. Despite repeated entreaties from Yahweh's prophets, no king in Israel departed from this apostasy up to the very day He brought the kingdom to its end.* * 2 Kings 17:21-23
3. Jeroboam's actions to secure his reign – *which Yahweh had already pledged to secure* – established a false worship system that governed his kingdom throughout its history. ***Though comprised of ten tribes of Abraham's covenant household, Israel was an apostate nation.***
 - a. Jeroboam insisted that his Israelite subjects could worship Yahweh (and ultimately other gods) at Dan and Bethel under the ministrations of his priests, but the law of the central sanctuary underscored that He could only be worshipped in the place He resided, and Yahweh had chosen Jerusalem to be that place, evident in the temple on Mount Zion.
 - b. Jeroboam showed himself to be a false king, and thus the Lord gave him no enduring dynasty. Yahweh severed Jeroboam's regal line (ref. 13:33-14:11, 15:25-30), and the same pattern continued with others of his successors. *The kingship in Israel followed the pattern of pagan kingdoms, with the succession of rulers coming through machinations, conspiracy, coup and assassination.* * ref. 16:1-13, 21:17-22; 2 Kings 15:8-31, etc.

B. Historical Overview – Three Phases of the Northern Kingdom

The life of the northern kingdom of Israel was ordered around three distinct historical phases that all focused on its relationship with the house of David (the southern kingdom of Judah).

1. The first phase began with Jeroboam's reign, which emerged from the northern ten tribes' rejection of David's kingdom and kingship. Thus this first phase was marked by hostility and open warfare between Israel and Judah, which continued until the reign of Ahab.
2. Ahab's ascent to the throne of Israel introduced the second phase, which saw the national and political relationship between the two kingdoms normalized (2 Chron. 18-21). The Kings account, which gives balanced attention to the histories of both Israel and Judah, notably devotes the most narrative space to Ahab and his reign, underscoring his unique notoriety and the profound impact he had on the kingdom of Israel (and ultimately Judah as well).
 - a. All of Israel's kings followed the pattern established by Jeroboam, but Ahab brought Israel's apostasy and flagrant idolatry to their highpoint, *especially through the influence of his wife Jezebel.*
 - b. Jezebel was a Sidonian princess who was determined to establish the worship of Baal and Phoenician paganism in Israel. *Her ultimate goal was to completely eradicate the knowledge and worship of Yahweh from her husband's kingdom.*
 - c. It was during this time that Elijah emerged as Yahweh's prophet, and he was notable as His chosen instrument for confronting Israel at its critical moment of decision. The kingdom had reached its low point in its relationship with Yahweh – *not by renouncing Him entirely, but by marginalizing Him in giving primary devotion to other deities.*
 - d. Ahab epitomized this duplicity by entering into a marriage alliance with Jehoshaphat, Yahweh's king in Judah, while at the same time fully embracing his own wife's efforts to fully paganize his kingdom. *It was this double-mindedness, epitomized in Israel's king, that Elijah was commissioned to confront – first by pronouncing Yahweh's punishment in the form of a prolonged drought, and then in his climactic confrontation with Israel and its false prophets at Mount Carmel.* * 1 Kings 17-18

Israel needed to move beyond an expedient political reconciliation with Judah to a whole-hearted return to the Lord of David's kingdom. Thus Elijah challenged the nation to end its duplicity, but ultimately to no avail. Now the opportunity for repentance had passed; nothing but time remained between Israel and its desolation.

 - e. Political alliance with Judah didn't bring Israel back to David's God. To the contrary, this alliance worked toward the deeper defilement of David's remaining house and kingdom. Ahab gave his daughter Athaliah to Jehoram, Jehoshaphat's son, but that union only served to infect Judah with her parents' disease (2 Chron. 21-23). *In the fallen order, the interaction of clean and unclean always and only works in one direction.* * Hag. 2:10ff
3. The third and final phase of Israel's history was marked by renewed hostility between the two kingdoms. Expedience drove the alliance between the two kingdoms, and expedience is determined by circumstance. So the growing Assyrian threat led Pekah, one of the last kings in Israel, to ally himself with the Arameans in order to conquer Judah and add its forces to their alliance in the hope of repelling an Assyrian invasion. * cf. 2 Chron. 28:1ff; Isaiah 7

- a. This Israelite-Aramean threat led Ahaz, the king in Judah, to form his own alliance with the Assyrians. He'd apparently been a vassal to the Assyrian king for some time, but he now underscored his commitment – and showed his unfaithfulness to Yahweh – by sending Tiglath-Pileser gold and silver taken from the temple. * 2 Kings 16
- b. Tiglath-Pileser honored Ahaz's petition and sent his forces against Pekah and Rezin, but then determined to continue south toward Jerusalem and Ahaz's throne. Only Yahweh's supernatural intervention stopped the Assyrians from destroying Jerusalem, but He acted out of His covenant faithfulness, thus affirming His word to Ahaz that David's throne and kingdom would stand, not by means of human schemes and arrangements, but because of the reality of *Immanuel: David's throne and kingdom were His, and He would uphold them with a view to fulfilling His covenant promises to David.* * Isaiah 7-9
- c. Yahweh intervened for Judah and David's throne (2 Kings 18-19; cf. Isaiah 36-37), but He left the house of Israel to the fury of the Assyrian army. As He'd pledged through Isaiah, the kings whom Ahaz feared were no more, and neither was the Israelite kingdom itself. For the Assyrians removed the ten tribes from their homeland and resettled it with foreigners taken from other conquered lands. * 2 Kings 17; ref. also Isaiah 7:1-9

III. Conclusions

1. The cleaving of the Israelite kingdom was a major part of the working of Yahweh's sword against David's house. And the sword's work continued after the division was complete – not only through hostility and warfare between Israel and Judah, but through mutual negative influence as each kingdom encouraged the other's apostasy. *Thus Israel effectively opposed David's house throughout its short existence, even when the two kingdoms were allied.* Nevertheless, Yahweh continued to call the apostate Israelite kingdom to repentance, until the day of His patience ended and He brought a complete end to it.
2. At the same time, the Lord granted a reprieve to David's house and kingdom, but it served only their detriment. Rather than learning from Israel's fate, Judah continued down the same path until its violation and guilt exceeded that of its northern counterpart. *For all her privilege and merciful treatment, Oholibah had shown herself to be a worse adulterer than her sister Oholah, and in the end she would meet the same fate.* * Ezek. 23; cf. 16:1-41
3. The ten northern tribes had renounced David's house and rule and formed a new nation, grounded and nurtured in apostasy. Israel was indistinguishable from the surrounding nations, and yet Yahweh remained faithful to them as Abraham's covenant children, repeatedly sending His prophets with His call to return to Him. Israel's apostasy and wickedness reached their low point with Ahab's reign, and the Lord met that situation with His prophet Elijah, sent to confront Israel with its moment of decision: *He would no longer allow them to divide their loyalty; they could return to Him with a whole heart, or He would abandon them to their false deities and the consequences of it.* The people assured Him of their commitment, but their hearts remained distant and disinterested and their destiny was settled. Judah would have its own time of decision when the Lord extended Hezekiah's life, but it, too, would miss its opportunity to repent and renew its faithfulness.

Centuries later a young Galilean prophet would take up the same theme with His Israelite brethren, challenging them with their own moment of crisis and decision – the moment that all previous moments had been building toward. They, too, would assert their faithfulness, but coming days would show otherwise. * Luke 4:14-30, 13:22-35, 19:28-44