

1 KINGS

Part Two: A Kingdom Divided (Chapters 12-22)

This section of 1 Kings introduces us to one of the darkest periods in Israel's history—the division of the nation into two kingdoms and the failure of almost all of the kings to remain faithful to Israel's covenant with God.

CHAPTER 12: Revolt of the northern tribes

“Your father put on us a heavy yoke. If you lighten the harsh service and the heavy yoke your father imposed on us, we will serve you.”(v.4)

After Solomon dies, all Israel assemble at Shechem to make his son Rehoboam king. The above quoted verse shows us how harsh Solomon has become on his people. He ends his reign as a tyrant. When the people plead with Rehoboam to lighten their burden, he asks for three days to reflect on their request. He listens to the old men and young men but follows the foolish advice of his peers. Their advice and Rehoboam's action lead to the division of the kingdom, which is described in economic (vv 1-25) and religious (vv 26-39) terms. Henceforth, the term 'Israel' will be used to normally refer to the northern kingdom. Sometimes, it will be used to refer to the whole nation, e.g., the phrase “God of Israel” (1 Kgs 17:1) is intended to mean the whole nation. The southern kingdom, made up of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, will be called Judah.

Verses 1-25—Economic/political division. The author describes Jeroboam in ambivalent terms. On the one hand, he is God's agent carrying out God's punishment on Solomon for his sins (11:35). His revolt is an understandable response to the unjust treatment placed on the northern tribes by Solomon and his successor Rehoboam (12:4). Yet leading a rebellion is seen as an apostasy against God's promises and plans for David and his dynasty. When Rehoboam plans to put down the rebellion, he is told by the prophet not to go forward for it is not God's will (vv 23-24). This leads the reader to wonder if the hostilities would have been prevented had Rehoboam listened to the advice of the elders (v.7). Scholars usually attribute such ambivalence and seeming contradictions in a text to the narrator's attempt to integrate different layers of traditions or sources.

Verses 26-33—Religious rebellion. While it may have been God's will to use Rehoboam to punish Solomon's sins, it certainly is not God's will for Jeroboam to lead the northern tribes into

apostasy. When the prophet tells Jeroboam that he will be ruler of the new kingdom made up of ten tribes, he warns him to keep the commands and statutes of the Lord (11:38). But the new king fails to heed the word of the prophet in several ways.

- He leads the people away from making Jerusalem their central place of worship because he believes that if they continue to go to Jerusalem, their hearts will return to Rehoboam (v.26).
- In a startling repeat of the sin of Israel at the base of Mount Sinai, Jeroboam makes two golden calves, declaring they represent the God who brought them out of Israel. He says to his people: “*You have been going up to Jerusalem long enough. Here is your God, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt*” (v.28). He puts one golden calf at a shrine in Dan and the other at a shrine in Bethel. These shrines become places of false worship, replacing the temple in Jerusalem where the Ark of the Covenant is kept.
- Jeroboam creates a new priesthood “from among the people who were not Levites” (v.31).

Now the break between Judah and Jerusalem is not only political but also religious and liturgical. As we continue reading 1 Kings, we notice that Jeroboam and *all* his successors are roundly condemned for failing to worship the one true God in Jerusalem. It is one thing for Jeroboam to rebel against the oppression of his people by Solomon and his son; it is another thing for him to lead his people away from worshipping God at the temple in Jerusalem.

Pause: What speaks to you most in chapter 12? In this chapter, Rehoboam and Jeroboam make poor decisions with dire consequences. What factors can lead us to make good and bad decisions?

CHAPTER 13: God's prophet condemns the Shrine at Bethel

While Jeroboam is at worship, a prophet from Judah suddenly enters the worship area and cries out against the altar the word of the Lord: “*O altar, altar, the Lord says, ‘A child shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name, who shall slaughter upon you the priests of the high places who offer sacrifice upon you, and he shall burn human bones upon you.’ He gave a sign that same day and said: ‘This is the sign*

that the Lord has spoken: the altar shall break up and the ashes on it shall be strewn about” (vv 2-3).

The prophet foretells that the altar where Jeroboam is officiating will be torn down and the false priests will be killed by Josiah, a future king of Judah. The prophet’s words are backed up by three powerful signs: the altar falls apart, Jeroboam’s arm withers, the withered arm heals (vv4-6). Notice that the chastened king petitions the man of God to “*entreat the Lord your God*” (v.6) to heal his hand. It seems that the God who brought Israel out of Egypt is no longer Jeroboam’s god. Despite the powerful intervention of the prophet, “*Jeroboam did not give up his evil ways, but again made priests for the high places from among the common people*”(v.33).

Jeroboam’s evil ways unfortunately established a pattern for those who succeeded him on the throne of the northern kingdom of Israel. Because the kings of Israel did not place their trust in God, the kingdom collapsed.

CHAPTER 14:1-20: Death of Jeroboam’s son

[The Lord said to Ahijah,] “*Jeroboam’s wife is coming to consult you about her son who is sick. This is what you must tell her....*” (v.5)

When the young prince falls ill, Jeroboam sends his wife in disguise to Ahijah, the one prophet who speaks well of him. The prophet is now old and blind. Jeroboam hopes to hide the identity of the child from the prophet, who may not look well on him because of his failures. God reveals the visitor’s identity to Ahijah who sends Jeroboam’s wife back with grim tidings. The child will die and so will Jeroboam’s line because of his apostasy from the ways of God. The root cause of Israel’s impending exile is idolatrous infidelity.

CHAPTERS 14:21 to 16:34: The kings of Israel and Judah

“He did evil in the Lord’s sight....” (15:26)

After Jeroboam’s death, the narrative of 1 & 2 Kings alternates back and forth between stories concerning the kings of Israel in the north and the kings of Judah in the south. All of the eight kings named in this section, with the exception of Asa (15:9-24), would be condemned because of their failure to remain faithful to Israel’s covenant with God. The last king mentioned in these chapters is Ahab (16:29-34), husband of the infamous Jezebel who battled with the prophet Elijah. To this engaging story we will now turn.

CHAPTER 17: Elijah confronts King Ahab

“As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, whom I serve, during these years there shall be no dew or rain except at my word.” (v.1)

“The jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, until the day when the Lord sends rain upon the earth.” (v.14)

The figure of Elijah dominates 1Kings 17-19, 21, and 2Kings 1-2. Elijah is regarded as one of Israel’s greatest prophets. In chapter 17, Elijah performs two miracles to show that the God of Israel, not Baal, is the one who gives life. Prophets are raised up by God to call the people to covenant fidelity with their God. They warn of judgment and punishment for infidelity but also give hope of restoration if the people turn from their evil ways.

Verses 1-6—The drought. The drought is announced as God’s response to Ahab’s policies favoring Baal, revered as the goddess of vegetation and rain. The announcement of a drought is intended to show the powerlessness of Baal to bring down rain. God’s power to *provide* for those who trust in him is shown when a dry riverbed yields water for the prophet, and ravens bring him food. “*The story of Elijah and the ravens reflects the common folktale motif of the hero being fed by beasts*” (Richard Nelson).

Verses 7-24—Elijah and the widow. Now God sends Elijah deep into Baal territory into the home of a Gentile widow who is about to die of hunger. Baal, the goddess of food and drink, is obviously unable to provide for her. But when the widow places her trust in the word of the prophet, she is blessed abundantly. The prophet works a second miracle for the widow when he petitions God to raise her son from the dead. The God of Israel grants life in the midst of death. In all of the Elijah stories, the emphasis is on the power of God’s word. Elijah is simply the messenger.

Pause: When life gets tough, we are called to place our trust in God. This is not always easy. Why? What can help us to place our whole trust in God?

CHAPTER 18: God and Baal battle on Mount Carmel

“Elijah appealed to all the people and said, ‘How long will you straddle the issue? If the Lord is God, follow him; if Baal, follow him.’” (v.21)

This chapter returns to the opening theme of chapter 17: who controls the rains—Baal or the God of

Israel? Among the gods of Canaan, Baal was worshipped as the god who rode on the clouds and controlled the rains in the sky.

God tells Elijah to go and “*present himself to the king*” (v.1). At this stage, the drought and famine have been going on for three years and Jezebel has been murdering the faithful disciples of the Lord. Obadiah, a servant of the king is doing everything he could to save the disciples of the God of Israel. When Elijah asks Obadiah to get him an appointment with Ahab, he becomes frightened for his life.

When Ahab and Elijah finally meet, they look upon each other as ‘trouble’ (v.17). Elijah challenges the 450 prophets of Baal to a contest at Mount Carmel.

Verses 19-46—Contest at Mount Carmel. Elijah presents the challenge: “The god who answers with fire is God.” Baal’s prophets agree (v.24). The scene on Mount Carmel is one of the most humorous stories in the Bible. From morning to night, the prophets of Baal call out to him to light the fire: “*Answer us, Baal!*”(v.26). When there is no response, Elijah suggests that they shout louder, as their god maybe praying or resting. They then whip themselves into a frenzy but nothing works. “*There was not a sound; no one answered, and no one was listening*” (v.29). Point: there is no answer because there is no Baal.

Then Elijah builds his altar, placing twelve stones on it to remind the people that Israel consists of twelve tribes and not just ten. He has his opponents drench the altar with water three times. Then Elijah calls out to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel to bring down fire on the altar. God responds immediately and his fire is so powerful that it consumes everything on the altar. The people are impressed. They fall on their knees and say: “*The Lord is God! The Lord is God!*” The prophets of Baal are put to death as a sign that evil has been removed from the land of Israel. The chapter ends with a return of the rain to the land, a fulfillment of God’s word in verse 1.

CHAPTER 19: A depressed prophet wants to leave his ministry

“This is enough, O Lord! Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers. He lay down and fell asleep under the broom tree, but then an angel touched him and ordered him to get up and eat.” (vv 4-5)

When Ahab tells his wife Jezebel all that Elijah has done, she doesn’t jump for joy. Rather, she becomes very angry. Ahab’s prophet’s job is to deify the king and queen and help perpetuate their kingdom. Elijah

who has caused the prophet’s death is a constant thorn in Jezebel’s side. Since she cannot control his actions, she sets out to kill him. Afraid for his life, Elijah flees to Beersheba, a town in Judah. He is so discouraged that he wants to die. The land is evil, the king and queen are evil, and his attempts to bring about reform seem to be a total failure.

But just as Elijah was nourished during the drought, now an angel of the Lord comes to him, not once but twice, to comfort him and give him new strength to go forward and continue his prophetic ministry. Fed with bread from heaven, Elijah travels for forty days and forty nights to Horeb, another name for Sinai, where Moses encountered God in the burning bush.

When Elijah arrives at Horeb, he enters a cave to rest. There he has another encounter with the Lord which occurs not where one might expect—in a storm, an earthquake or fire—but in a tiny breeze. Elijah hides his face from God because according to Mosaic tradition, no one can look upon the face of God and live (Ex. 33:18-23).

When Elijah continues to complain (v.14), God ignores his plight and announces his new mission. (The primary focus of chapter 19 is Elijah’s attempt to quit his prophetic call and God’s insistence that he continue.) He is commissioned to leave the desert and anoint three people: Hazael, as king of Aram; Jehu, as king of Israel; and Elisha, as his successor.

The chapter ends with the call of Elisha (vv 19-21). The throwing of the cloak on Elisha expresses his divine call to share in Elijah’s prophetic mission. Elisha’s request to go home and kiss his father goodbye reminds us of a similar desire expressed by a disciple when Jesus calls him (Mt. 8:21-22). Elisha’s destruction of his animals and plow symbolizes obedience to God’s call and willingness to totally detach himself from his former way of life.

Pause: What speaks to you most in chapter 19? What can cause you to be discouraged in your efforts to be a faithful disciple of the Lord? What helps you when discouragement sets in?

CHAPTER 20: Ahab’s victories and failure to apply the ban

Then the prophet came up to Ahab, king of Israel and said, “The Lord says, ‘Do you see all this huge army? When I deliver it up to you today, you will know that I am the Lord.’”(v.13)

In this chapter, Elijah takes a back seat while a nameless prophet promises Ahab success against the king of Aram who is a big bully.

Ahab won his first victory because he listened to God's prophet (vv 12-22). He won a second victory because the Arameans stupidly believed that Israel's God could be conquered on the plain (v.23). The disproportions between the two armies were designed to show that Israel won because God was fighting their battle (v.28).

We know from the rules of "holy war" (see commentary on Joshua) that God is the warrior who fights Israel's battles. When Israel wins, *all* the spoils belong to God—including Ben-hadad. Ahab has no right to set him free (vv 31-34). In verse 42, Ahab is told that "*because you set free the man I doomed to destruction, your life shall pay for his life.*" Ahab shall forfeit his life for disobeying the word of the prophet.

CHAPTER 21: Seizure of Naboth's vineyard

"Elijah said to Ahab: 'Because you have given yourself up to evil in the Lord's sight, I am bringing evil upon you....'" (v.20)

The chapter is a straightforward story not needing much comment. It shows Jezebel at her wickedest. After the murderous deed is done, Ahab and Jezebel are happy to take possession of the vineyard.

Verses 17-29—Elijah confronts Ahab. God tells Elijah to go to Samaria and confront Ahab for his wicked deed. When Elijah issues a hellfire-and-damnation sermon to Ahab, he surprisingly repents. His life is spared for now. Message: if Israel listens to the prophets God sends to her, God will have mercy on her. We will have to wait until 2Kgs 9:30-37 to see the fulfillment of Elijah's prophecy against Jezebel (v.23).

CHAPTER 22: Israel and Judah join forces against a common enemy

"I see all Israelscattered on the mountainslike a sheep without a shepherd, and the Lord saying: 'They have no master!'" (v.17)

Verses 1-8. Relationships between the northern and southern kingdoms have improved. Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, visits Ahab, king of Israel, and offers to join him against the king of Aram. But before a decision to go to war is made, Jehoshaphat asks that they seek a word from the Lord. Ahab agrees and assembles 400 prophets, all of whom say: "*Go up,*

the Lord will deliver a victory to the king." Somehow Jehoshaphat is not satisfied and asks: "*Is there no other prophet of the Lord whom we can consult?"*(v.7). Ahab says that there is a prophet called Micaiah, but one whom he detests because he always "prophesies not good but evil" about him (v.8).

Verses 15-23.When Micaiah arrives, he initially agrees with the 400 false prophets and tells Ahab to go to war. Why does Micaiah lie? Perhaps he is mocking or poking fun at the false prophets. "Sure, do what they told you, they know the Lord." Ahab does not believe that Micaiah is being truthful with him: "*How many times must I adjure you to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?"*(v.16).Okay, Micaiah says, since you want the truth, I will give it to you: "*I see all Israel scattered on the mountains, like a sheep without a shepherd*" (v.17)—a prophecy that Ahab will die in the upcoming battle. Ahab's evil is so great that the Lord's judgment against him is final. To make sure that Ahab does go into battle, God is even willing to allow a 'lying spirit' to enter the mouths of the false prophets (vv 19-23).

In verse 13, the messenger tells Micaiah that "*the prophets are unanimously good for the king.*"Of course, they are only telling the king what he wants to hear. God uses their false or lying word to seduce Ahab to go into a battle that will bring about his downfall.

Verses 26-28. Ahab orders Micaiah's imprisonment for his boldness in speaking truth to power, until he returns from battle. Micaiahtells Ahab: "*If you return in safety, the Lord has not spoken through me*" (v.28).

Verses 29-39.The battle story resumes with verse 29. Ahab's attempt to disguise himself does not work. He is hit by a random bow (v.34). When the dogs lick Ahab's blood, Elijah's word (21:19) regarding his death is fulfilled. Even though secular historians consider Ahab's reign a very successful one (v.39), he is strongly condemned by the writer for his failure to keep his people faithful to their covenant with God.

Verses 41-51 tell us that Jehoshaphat's reign in Judah was, for the most part, a good one. Like his father Asa, he did well in the eyes of the Lord.

Pause: Prophets speak truths that we prefer not to hear. Who are some modern day prophets? Why do you consider them prophets?