

A LOOK AT A BOOK: 1 Kings, Pt. 2

September 29, 2013

1 Kings 11

The Decline and Death of Solomon

After the glowing descriptions of Solomon's awesome wealth and power in the preceding section, the writer now begins a stark portrayal of his failures. A nation ground down by heavy taxation and forced labor to keep up the luxury of a lavish court with its degrading crowd of foreign wives and concubines is ripe for revolt. The king and his successors are about to reap what they have sown.

11:1-13. This section begins with the word "but," an important conjunction marking a dramatic transition from the breathtaking appraisal of Solomon's power in chapter 10. Polygamy in ancient Israel was apparently permitted, even though it obviously contradicted God's ideal of one man for one woman for life. Most of the biblical patriarchs had numerous wives. David had fifteen. Abijah had fourteen. Rehoboam, Solomon's son, had eighteen wives and sixty concubines. While the daughter of Pharaoh held a special position as the number one wife of the king, verse 3 tells us Solomon also had 699 other wives as well as 300 concubines.

Notice that the women came from those countries that were near neighbors to Israel, indicating that Solomon's purpose for these marriages was not altogether sensual nor to surpass the harems of other monarchs but also to seal political alliances that would strengthen his country. What made the situation intolerable was that he chose the women from among those nations God had specifically warned him to avoid. In several places in the Scriptures, which Solomon knew well, God had forbidden intermarriage with the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites. In defiance of God's clear command, Solomon chose his harem from these very nations. God's pointed restrictions against intermarriage were not for racial reasons, but for religious reasons.

Solomon built altars to these pagan deities on the Mount of Olives, directly opposite the beautiful temple, where crowds of passersby would see them and be tempted to imitate the worship practices of the royal harem. The influence of these pagan "high places" he built was long-lasting. They were still standing three hundred years later when Josiah began his reign over Judah and finally destroyed them (2 Kings 23:13). Solomon's direct personal involvement in idolatry, even if it was for pragmatic, political reasons, is impossible to disregard. Verse 9 says God was "angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned from the Lord." The severity of God's punishment also points to the severity of Solomon's sin. The seriousness of his disobedience is intensified enormously when we remember that Solomon deliberately violated the command of God in spite of God's gracious personal appearances (v. 9).

Now it is true that the king did not totally abandon his worship of Yahweh; he is actually guilty of a kind of half-heartedness. He "did not fully follow the Lord" (v. 6). In God's eyes half-heartedness is no better than outright apostasy. Stubborn disobedience is obviously a sin, but so is falling short, so is halting between two opinions, so is trying to serve two masters.

11:14-25. Solomon's life was a tragedy, having a disastrous ending brought about by moral weakness. Even though through most of its years his life was characterized by wisdom and wealth, in the end he received the consolation prize. Verse 14 says, "The Lord raised up an adversary against Solomon, Hadad the Edomite," Verse 23 says, "And God raised up another adversary against him, Rezon the son of Eliadah." And Solomon, who in 5:4 told King Hiram, "God has given me rest on every side, so that there is no adversary," now has two.

11:26-43. God said in verse 11 that He would tear the kingdom from Solomon and give it to his servant. We are now told in verse 26 who that servant was – Jeroboam. As the founder and ruler of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, he became known as Jeroboam I. Following in the steps of his father, who was an official under Solomon, the young Jeroboam won recognition as a man of high qualities and was appointed to a place of importance on Solomon's staff.

Solomon, removed from the man in the street in the splendid isolation of his palace, was insulated from the plight of the masses. But not Jeroboam. Working with the common people on the construction projects in Jerusalem and as an overseer of the labor force from the House of Joseph, he had a chance to learn firsthand about the bitterness of the oppressed citizens. Jeroboam sympathized with the bitterness of those with whom he worked as they chafed under the heavy taxation and forced labor imposed on them to keep up Solomon's inflated lifestyle. And he used his position to stir up disaffection against the government.

With providential timing God sent his prophet Ahijah to meet Jeroboam in the wilderness outside Jerusalem to call him dramatically to his destiny as the leader of the ten tribes. We are introduced to an example of prophetic drama in verse 30, when Ahijah removes his new cloak and rips it into twelve pieces in front of the startled Jeroboam. This spectacular visual aid underlined the seriousness of God's promise to "tear the kingdom away" from Solomon (v. 11). There is some confusion in the passage about the twelve tribes being divided – ten for Jeroboam and one for Rehoboam, which add up to only eleven. The answer seems to be found in 12:23 where the tribe of Benjamin is counted with Judah as one tribe, apparently because Benjamin was so insignificant. The breakup of the kingdom was not a part of God's original plan. But as it often does, human sin intervened in God's plan, and He had to make a revision. The Great Potter often has to take a vessel that becomes cracked or flawed and reshape it, not in as beautiful a form as He first intended, but nevertheless still useful.

Solomon reigned about forty years and was about sixty years old when he died in approximately 932 B.C. But Solomon did not die like his father David had died. David remained faithful to the Lord to the very last, and he died nobly, with words of wisdom for his heir. If Solomon's reign had ended as gloriously as it had begun, the Jewish nation would have held him in higher esteem than David his father. But this was not the case, and the unique and radiant career of Israel's wisest man is summed up with a stereotyped formula similar to that of scores of ordinary kings. Here again is the reminder that even the mightiest vessel may be shipwrecked within sight of home port.

How can we assess his life? He was a man of peace, not warlike as David was. He sought wisdom – not the world's variety, but wisdom from God. It was his desire to administer his government according to the law and will of Yahweh. His enormous talents included knowledge

of the world as a naturalist, knowledge of humans as an expert in their behavior, knowledge of literature as a poet and writer. He had splendid tastes, which he bestowed upon his kingdom in vast building projects and cultural enhancements. He not only made Israel a majestic kingdom of this world, but he erected the temple to the glory of the spiritual world, lavishing upon it countless treasures. At its dedication, Solomon stood as one of the most imposing figures in human history.

But gradually, almost imperceptibly, his glory began to fade. Brought on by luxury, pleasure, compromise, and disobedience, he began to exchange his godly wisdom for the wisdom of the world. He lost the strength of his convictions and, of all things, began to justify idolatry! Can you imagine? The same man who built the magnificent temple on Mount Zion also built, in order to please his mistresses from Ammon and Moab, altars to Chemosh and Molech on Mount Zion in the very face of God's house. By degrees the glory passed away, and darkness and hopelessness triumphed in the end. He wore one of the fairest and noblest crowns a mortal could wear, but it was perishable, not enduring like the crown of life promised to the faithful.

1 KINGS 12

REHOBOAM DIVIDES THE NATION

Solomon's death leaves a gigantic hole in Israel's leadership structure. David's son, the man who gave Israel political cohesion, wealth, prestige, and religious unity, is dead. Who could possibly fill his place? The text has already introduced what will occur. God will continue to honor the covenant with David, so Solomon's son will have a two-tribe kingdom (1 Kings 11:32-36). Because of Solomon's idolatry, however, Jeroboam will rule the other ten tribes (1 Kings 11:26-31). The Lord has sent these promises through Ahijah the prophet, so the predictions must come true. What remains to be seen is how they will come to pass.

Sadly, Solomon's son Rehoboam's lack of political skill opens the door for the split (12:1-24). Just as sadly, Jeroboam does not appreciate what God has done for him, for he will establish an alternative religion in his new kingdom (12:25-33). Though the Lord sends prophets to warn Jeroboam to change his ways, he refuses to do so (13:1-10).

12:1. Perhaps Rehoboam does not sense the depth of northern dissatisfaction with Solomon's policies. The people await him in Shechem, and there is no reason to believe that they are determined to reject Rehoboam.

12:6-11. Rehoboam consults two sets of advisors. The elders tell him to give a "favorable" (literally, "good") response. If he will serve the people, then they will serve him. These seasoned political veterans seem to know exactly what the young king is facing. They realize it is time to accede to the crowd's wishes.

But Rehoboam rejects the elders' advice and consults with the counselors his own age. Like Rehoboam, they are young, ambitious, proud and insecure. They tell him to intimidate the crowd by declaring that he is tougher than Solomon. Their theory is that servant leadership will not work. Only a bully can handle a diverse kingdom.

12:12-15. When the three days are over, Rehoboam delivers the harsh message. The author explains why “the king did not listen to the people.” This lack of judgment and its results, this “turn of events,” “was from the Lord” so that God’s word through Ahijah could come true. Nothing occurs here because of “chance.” There is no “chance” God is sovereign. Still, Rehoboam’s decision is his own. The text maintains the tension between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility that pervades all of Scripture.

12:16-20. Without hesitation the people reject Rehoboam’s authority over them. They deny any responsibility to David’s dynasty and leave Rehoboam to rule Judah. Rehoboam makes one final, futile attempt to maintain control over the north. He sends Adoniram, the longtime head of forced labor (cf. 1 Kings 4:6), to the people. Adoniram is stoned to death. The “king” flees for his life. Jeroboam becomes the popular choice for king in the north, and God’s word is fulfilled.

12:21-24. At home Rehoboam gathers a massive force, intent on invading the north. At this point, however, another prophetic voice surfaces. Shemaiah, simply designated as “the man of God,” a title that takes on growing significance in the story, warns the king to stay home. Why? Because God says, “This is my doing.” Rehoboam obeys God in this matter. Israel has been irreparably split into northern (ten tribes) and southern (two tribes) segments. The year is ca. 930 B.C.

12:26-27. Having secured his military and economic interests, Jeroboam now moves to protect his religious concerns. The all-knowing narrator divulges what the king thinks to himself: if northerners sacrifice in Jerusalem, then their allegiance might return to Rehoboam. This fear amounts to a lack of faith, since surely the God who brought him to power can protect him from harm. God has promised him a dynasty as enduring as David’s if he would keep God’s commandments (1 Kings 11:38).

12:28-30. Bad advice again mars a king’s life (cf. 1 Kings 12:10-11). “After seeking advice,” Jeroboam introduces a new form of religion that in effect institutionalizes idolatry. On the pretense of being concerned for the people’s travel capacities, he erects “two golden calves” that supposedly represent the “gods” who redeemed Israel from Egypt. They may worship one of these images in either Bethel, the ancient place where Jacob had his stairway to heaven dream (Genesis 28:10-22), or in Dan, the northernmost city in the country.

12:31-33. Besides constructing national shrines at Bethel and Dan, Jeroboam institutes local worship sites at “high places” throughout the land. This action further dilutes worship.

The institutionalization of a non-Mosaic religion is now complete. A syncretistic mix of Yahwism and Baalism is in place. Northerners will have to make a special effort just to worship the Lord. Just as there are now two nations, two capitals, two governments, and two kings, there are also two religions. The major differences are as follows:

Judah	Israel
No images of God	Veneration of calves
Levitical priesthood	Multitribe priesthood
Central sanctuary	Local and regional sanctuaries

1 Kings 14:1-20**Ahijah Prophecies Against Jeroboam and Jeroboam's Death**

14:1-3. For the third time prophecy impacts Jeroboam's life. On this occasion he is desperate for a word about his son's illness, so he disguises his wife, arms her with some presents, and sends her to Ahijah. It is ironic that he tries to disguise his wife's identity from a man whom he expects to divulge whether his son will live or die and furthermore that a king should send such a paltry gift, apparently because he fears to reveal who needs the information.

14:4-18. Ahijah's physical sight has failed due to old age. Perhaps this fact helps explain why Jeroboam thought he could be fooled. Since Ahijah is a prophet, though, he can see things no one else can see.

When Jeroboam's wife arrives, she finds Ahijah ready to identify her and give her five bits of bad news. First, he condemns Jeroboam for making idols, which makes God consider him "more evil than all who lived before" him. Second, "every last male" in Jeroboam's line will die. Third, Ahijah states that her sick boy will die. Fourth, with Jeroboam's family gone, Israel will obviously receive a new royal dynasty. Fifth, Ahijah makes the long-term promise that Israel will go into exile because of their adherence to Jeroboam's religion and for the acceptance of fertility cults. This last prediction will take two hundred years to occur, but it is as certain as the short-range promises.

As soon as the woman returns home, the third prediction comes true, which serves as a pledge that the others will also be fulfilled. Readers now have some short and long-term promises to guide them in the text. The man of God predicted Josiah's reign, which does not occur until 640-609 BC, or until 2 Kings 23-23. Ahijah's prediction of Israel's fall is not fulfilled until 2 Kings 17, which describes events in 722 BC. Of course, the deaths of Jeroboam's sons will take place much sooner, by 1 Kings 15:29 (ca. 908 BC).

14:19-20. Here the author reveals that one of his sources for the data on Jeroboam's life was "the annals of the kings of Israel," a document that includes details of major events, wars, and decisions in Jeroboam's reign. He ruled for twenty-two years (ca 930-909) and was succeeded by Nadab, his son.

1 KINGS 14:21-16:28**The Reign of Rehoboam in Judah**

Not much time nor space is wasted in narrating the remaining years of King Rehoboam. His weak, vacillating performance as king led Judah into sins far more severe than those of Israel to the north. Jeroboam built a couple of golden bulls, but Rehoboam, not to be outdone, built "high places, sacred pillars, and wooden images on every high hill and under every green tree" (v. 23). He also allowed "perverted persons," male and female prostitutes, to practice their cultic religions with court approval (v. 24). Within five years after he assumed the throne of his powerful father Solomon, Judah fell under the oppression of Egypt.

Shishak, the pharaoh, had been watching the developments in Solomon's kingdom. He had given sanctuary to Jeroboam after his abortive rebellion against Solomon, and now his ally had taken ten of the twelve tribes in Solomon's kingdom away, leaving only Judah, along with tiny Benjamin, in the South. Shishak marched on Jerusalem. His invasion, not detailed here, has been found by archaeologists recorded on inscribed stones in the ruins of the Egyptian temple of Amun at Karnak.

Those beautiful golden shields that Solomon had hung in the House of the Cedars of Lebanon as symbols of his wealth were now given to Shishak as tribute along with other golden treasures from the temple. "He took away everything" (v. 26), leaving Rehoboam to quickly commission substitute shields of bronze to take the place of the treasures of his father. What a contrast! From mighty Solomon with all his wisdom, wealth, and power to spineless Rehoboam with his shallow judgement, his cheap bronze shields, and a kingdom subjected to Egypt.

1 KINGS 17-18

Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath, 1 Kings 17:1-24

Elijah's name is a combination of two names for God, Elohim and Yahweh (or Jehovah). It means "Yahweh is God." Although he is one of the best known prophets in the Old Testament, we know very little about his early life. According to verse 1 he was born in Tishbeh, an unidentified village probably in the vicinity of Gilead, where he was living when he appears on the scene.

Elijah leaps into the arena. He and the royal couple had apparently never met. Without preface or introduction, he appeared before Ahab and Jezebel in Samaria and with startling bravado abruptly announced the drought. No personal credentials. No reasons for the drought. No conditions for mercy. He delivered his message and just as suddenly disappeared.

Dew and rain were the two main sources of moisture in ancient Israel. To cut off both sources of moisture would mean an absolute drought of extreme proportions. Since Baal was supposed to be the god of fertility, the god of the storm, present in the dew and rain, the drought was a direct challenge to this alien deity.

Little wonder Elijah had to flee from the angry presence of King Ahab. Not only was he escaping the king's wrath but also what surely would have been his constant pressure on Elijah to call off the drought. After all, Elijah had said rain would come only at his word. If he could have found Elijah, can you imagine how often in three and a half years he would have pestered him to bring the rain? So God sent him to a safe hiding place beside a stream flowing into the east bank of the Jordan, where there would be ample drinking water and where God would miraculously provide him bread and meat delivered twice a day by ravens.

In time the drought worsened. The Brook Cherith dried up, and God sent Elijah some one hundred miles north to the home of a widow in the Phoenician coastal city of Zarephath, about seven miles south of Sidon. Here he witnessed the God of miracles at work again.

A poverty-stricken widow suffering the deprivation of the drought with a son she was struggling to feed. And Elijah was supposed to ask her for – of all things – water and something to eat. The hopelessness served to intensify the approaching miracle. When the prophet asked her to bake him a cake from her last supply of oil and flour, it was a severe test of her faith. She passed with flying colors. Believing God, she gave up the certain for the uncertain and obediently trusted His word. The miracle of the unending supply of oil and flour was her reward.

The next miracle was even more spectacular. The resurrection of her dead son brought her faith to its highest point. Seeing her boy alive again, she exclaimed, “Now by this I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is the truth” (v. 24).

Her immature faith struggles with the tragedy, and she assumes the death is God’s punishment for some unknown sin in her life. She believed Elijah’s saintly presence in her home had somehow drawn God’s attention to her. If he had not come, God would have continued to overlook her sin, and her son would not have died. It is sad to see the same distorted belief expressed today in the midst of suffering. “What did I do to deserve this?” is a question pastors and counselors hear too often from confused people facing tragedy.

In the upper chamber, Elijah stretched himself over the body of the child in the same manner of Elisah in 2 Kings 4:34 and Paul in Acts 20:10; and the boy came back to life.

Elijah and Obadiah, 1 Kings 18:1-16

Despite the fact that the drought was severe in Samaria, Ahab did not change his ways. There was only one thing to do. Elijah must lay before the people a convincing proof that Yahweh was the true God. So after about three years in Zarephath, Elijah was sent to face Ahab and lay down the challenge.

At this point we are introduced to an interesting and inspiring character named Obadiah, not the canonical prophet with the same name, but a God-fearing high official in Ahab’s court. He was probably second in command in Israel. And yet, in this unlikely and highly visible position in Ahab’s court, Obadiah maintained a brave loyalty to the true faith. Neither Jezebel’s flatteries nor her frowns had moved him. His brave protection of the prophets of Yahweh described in verse 4 was apparently necessitated by Jezebel’s campaign to eliminate the worship of Yahweh in Israel.

In his typical manner, Elijah “suddenly” met Obadiah, who recognized the prophet immediately. His reason for not telling Ahab he had found Elijah was that he feared the prophet would suddenly disappear and anger Ahab further. That fear was justified. Elijah had a way of doing just that.

Elijah and the Prophets of Baal, 1 Kings 18:17-27

The conversation between the king and the prophet beginning in verse 17 confirms that Ahab still blamed the drought on Elijah’s arbitrary stubbornness, not on his own idolatry. Like Nathan’s “Thou art the man,” Elijah sets the record straight. Israel is troubled because Ahab has replicated his father Omri’s disobedience and added to it his own idolatry. A great national contest will settle once and for all who is the true God.

It was decision time. No one could avoid it. Ahab was mistaken. One cannot serve Yahweh and Baal together. “If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him” (v. 21). The phrase “How long will you falter between two opinions?” is difficult to translate clearly. So, even though an exact translation is difficult, the obvious meaning is: “How long will you keep on dancing from one leg to the other, like a bird trying to straddle a widening branch or a man trying to take both forks of a road at the same time?” In other words, “How long will you try to worship both Yahweh and Baal at the same time?” The statement is clearly a metaphor to condemn half-hearted, double-minded indecision.

In order to forestall any accusations of unfairness, Elijah set the conditions of the contest to give every possible concession to the prophets of Baal: (1) They could be first to choose the sacrifice. (2) They could pray first and for as long as they wished. (3) The proof-sign was to be fire. Since Baal was supposed to be the god of the sun, the god of the storm, they could not object. So they set up their altar and called on their god to answer.

Elijah’s taunts were classic sarcasms. One slur was especially abrasive. The phrase translated “he is busy” has been translated in other versions: “He is pursuing,” “he is gone aside,” “he is engaged,” “he has business to transact,” or “he hath an occasion to retire.” Most commentators believe the phrase is a euphemism for “turning aside for a call of nature,” or “going to the privy.”

1 KINGS 18-19

Elijah and the Prophets of Baal, 1 Kings 18:18-46

Elijah had time for his own calm and deliberate preparations. How composed and self-assured he is in contrast to the wild acrobatics of the Baal worshippers. There must have been nearby a previous altar to Yahweh which had been torn down, maybe by Jezebel’s followers. From the old altar Elijah took twelve stones from which to symbolically form the base of a new altar. The trench, as big as the square area of field in which two seahs (about five gallons) of grain might be planted, was dug. Then, symbolically, twelve jars of water were poured over it all. After his simple and dignified prayer, the mighty fire of God fell and consumed sacrifice, altar, stones, water, everything. The people, now convinced, cried out, “The Lord, He is God!” “Yahweh is Elohim!” Those words in Hebrew were actually Elijah’s name! “Yah is El!”

The humble entreaty of the lonely prophet of Yahweh on the mountain is moving. His servant, who is not mentioned before now, climbed higher to see the first small approaching cloud, and Elijah warned Ahab to start his chariot ride back to Jezreel. Jezebel was waiting for him there. Then, with the hand of the Lord upon him in renewed strength, Elijah outruns the chariot to Jezreel, about seventeen miles cross country.

Elijah Escapes from Jezebel, 1 Kings 19:1-14

Apparently Ahab and Jezebel had a second home in Jezreel. When the king’s chariot arrived there from Carmel, Elijah, having outrun him, waited to see what would happen when Jezebel heard the report. If he expected Ahab to force Jezebel to give up her campaign against Yahweh-worship, Elijah had overestimated the king’s courage. If he expected Jezebel to admit defeat and give up her opposition, Elijah had underestimated the queen’s determination. Whichever was the

case, the prophet seemed surprised and disappointed when Jezebel sent her messenger with the threat in verse 2. The Septuagint adds a phrase to Jezebel's warning, "As surely as you are Elijah and I am Jezebel." How could the high-flying Elijah, fresh from his spectacular victory, so suddenly appear frightened, running for his life from the Phoenician princess he had so recently challenged? He wanted to be alone with God in order to pour out his troubles, recommit his soul to the Lord, and see what God would say to him. It is difficult to believe that the man who a few hours earlier had witnessed God's convincing fire at Carmel, who could vividly remember the miraculous drought, the providential ravens, the widow's oil and her risen son, could so quickly melt before Jezebel and retreat in cowardice. Even courageous heroes are often afraid. So perhaps we should not be surprised that even this super-prophet had moments of fear, disappointment, and self-pity.

Beersheba was a hundred miles from Jezreel on the extreme southern border of Judah's territory. "From Dan to Beersheba" was the biblical phrase used to describe the entire territory of Palestine. He left his servant in Beersheba and went still deeper into the wilderness. The servant, who first appeared with Elijah on Mount Carmel, was, according to legend, the son of the widow of Zarephath who was raised from the dead. Exhausted physically and emotionally, and unable to go any farther, Elijah sat down under a broom bush to rest. Here, under his lonely shelter, Elijah finally gave in to the weariness of his soul and cried out for death. He did not contemplate suicide, for he believed God was the Lord of life. Though a man might wish to die, he was not at liberty to take his life. Only God had the right to do that. Twice the bone-weary man of God fell asleep only to be awakened by an angel with food and water. After rest and miraculous nourishment, Elijah was able to travel for forty days and nights into the Sinai desert as far as Mount Horeb, over a hundred fifty miles further south.

God addressed a question to the prophet, which He repeated again in verse 13: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Though it contains the sting of a divine rebuke, it seems to have been God's gracious way of inviting Elijah to speak, to pour out his heart. The correct answer to God's question, "What are you doing here?" would have been, "I was afraid of Jezebel and ran to hide in this cave." Instead, like a martyr, he felt compelled to piously remind God about his zeal, his commitment, and his lonely suffering. Despondency has a way of selectively focusing on certain facts from life and conveniently overlooking others. As he gushed out his lonely complaint about being the only faithful one left, he forgot about the great multitudes at Carmel who acknowledged that Yahweh was God. He forgot about the one hundred prophets protected by courageous Obadiah. Despair is always color blind; it can only see the dark tints.

Of the several theophanies in the Old Testament, the one described in the next section is perhaps the most famous. God sent the wind, earthquake, and fire, but His presence was not found in these spectacular demonstrations of destruction. Instead, it was in the "still small voice" that followed them. Others translate this phrase "a gentle little breeze," "a sound of thin silence," "a light whisper."

Elijah needed to restore his faith in God, his faith in himself, and his faith in others. This experience in the wilderness addressed all three. God was still there, as powerful and loving as ever. Elijah could still trust him. He could believe in himself because he was still important to God. There was work for him to do. His faith in others was renewed when God reminded him

that he was not alone in the battle after all. There were the prophets in the caves; there was brave Obadiah. There were the multitudes who proclaimed their renewed faith at Carmel, and, as he will be told in verse 18, seven thousand others who have remained faithful to Yahweh. In reverence and humility, Elijah wrapped his mantle about his face and returned to his cave. He had learned his lesson. On Horeb's mountain, God turned Elijah's eyes away from his own problem and refocused them on others. The prophet needed to begin thinking about the faithful remnant who had not bowed the knee to Baal; he needed to be concerned with Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha, who were waiting for his prophetic word. The vision of need injected the prophet with new enthusiasm for the task.

Elijah Receives a New Task, 1 Kings 19:15-21

One cure for depression is to get busy. So the first word from God to Elijah after the dramatic demonstration on Mount Horeb is "Go." The anointing of Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha would ensure that the campaign against Baal worship would continue, and a faithful remnant of Yahweh worshippers would survive. Jehu was actually the grandson of Nimshi, not his son. Nowhere else in the Bible is there mention of a prophet being anointed, and there is no record that such an anointing ceremony for Elisha ever took place.

Casting the mantle on this young farmer was Elijah's ceremonial way of drafting him for the prophetic task to which God had called him. Elisha obviously knew what it meant. "He left the oxen and ran after Elijah" (v. 20). Like the reluctant followers in Jesus' parable, Elisha asked for the privilege of first saying goodbye to his parents. "Go (kiss your parents). Then come back, for (remember) what I have done to you (i.e. casting my mantle on you.)" Elisha must have understood it this way. Not only did he go back to tell his parents farewell but he also symbolically put his entire past life behind him by sacrificing his oxen and burning them with a fire kindled from the wooden plow. We will hear more from Elisha later when he appears again during Elijah's translation scene in 2 Kings 2:1-14.

1 KINGS 20-21:17

Ahab Defeats the Syrians, 1 Kings 20

The tone of this section of the story shifts considerably. Elijah has been the central character up to this point, but now the focus is on Ahab. In this section, the attitude toward Ahab seems more forgiving. He is presented as a more righteous and courageous leader whom the Lord's prophets support with favorable predictions.

Ahab's readiness to submit to Ben-Hadad's demands after only a brief siege of Samaria may be explained by the fact that he was already a semivassal of Syria. Or it may be he understood Ben-Hadad's first demand in 2-4 as no more than a general demand for the usual form of tribute, which he was willing to pay in order to spare the city. But when the second, more specific demand was delivered (vv. 5-6) Ahab realized the terms were too extreme. Ben-Hadad was asking for total subjection and immediate possession of all of Samaria.

With the brash self-confidence of a bully, Ben-Hadad responded with the boastful threat of total destruction in verse 10. Another interesting translation (Lucian's recension of the Septuagint) expressed it, "There will not be enough dust left of Samaria for foxes to build their holes there."

But Ahab had a way with words, too, and answered the taunt with what was probably a well-known proverb in that day. “Let not the one who puts on his armor boast like the one who takes it off” (v. 11). It was an ancient verse of “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch.” So confident of victory was the Syrian monarch that he was prematurely celebrating with his troops in drunken abandon when Ahab’s clever proverb was delivered.

Meanwhile, an unknown prophet delivered to Ahab the divine plan whereby God would deliver Samaria from the surrounding armies. None of the three prophets mentioned here and in verses 28 and 35 is identified. The 232 “young leaders of the provinces” were probably skilled assault commandos who would precede the standing army in an initial surprise attack. Caught off guard, their leaders drunk, their ranks divided among thirty-two competitive kings, each more interested in the safety of his own ranks than in the success of the overall objective, Ben-Hadad’s army panicked.

Some interpreters link the 7,000 Israelite soldiers in verse 15 with the 7,000 in 19:18 who had not worshipped Baal. Such an interpretation would add strength to the idea that it was God who gave the victory, this time by using His righteous band of faithful followers.

As they rehearsed the battle, Ben-Hadad’s advisers drew the conclusion that Israel’s gods must be “mountain gods,” giving Israel a military advantage when they fought on higher elevations such as the hill of Samaria. Since their own gods were gods of the plain, the Syrians concluded they had been unfairly matched in the Samaritan campaign. So the Syrian strategy was to challenge Israel again in the spring, this time on the flat plains surrounding the city of Aphek.

Verse 27 is difficult to translate, but its obvious purpose is to contrast the enormous number of Ben-Hadad’s troops with a grossly outnumbered Israeli army. Up against Syria’s vast host, Ahab’s army looked “like two little flocks of goats” (v. 27). For the second time an unknown prophet reminded Ahab that he would prevail, but only because of Yahweh’s miraculous intervention (v. 28). An unusually large number of Syrian troops were killed that day, both on the battle field and in a collapsing city wall at Aphek where survivors had fled.

With no hope of survival apart from the compassion of Ahab, Ben-Hadad and his hapless survivors donned sackcloth, a traditional symbol of submission and repentance, and prepared to throw themselves on the mercy of their captors. For added effect they put ropes around their heads. The ropes probably represented halters by which their captors could lead them around. Or perhaps the ropes were symbols that their surrender was so complete that they were even ready to be hanged.

The closing episode in chapter 20 is another illustration of the style of historical writing that is unique to the Books of Kings. A traditional historian would probably have portrayed Ahab’s Syrian-Israeli peace treaty as a stroke of diplomatic genius. The king would be praised for the national security and power his shrewd political negotiations had guaranteed. But not the biblical writer. Interested only in interpreting these historical events from the perspective of God’s purpose for Israel, he denounced Ahab’s treaty as a serious violation of Yahweh’s will. Instead of being praised for what he did, Ahab would be punished by the loss of his life. (v. 42). Acting out the part of a wounded soldier, the prophet cleverly led Ahab to judge his own case, a

technique similar to the one Nathan the prophet had employed when he induced King David to judge the fictional rich man who slaughtered a poor man's lamb.

Ahab Takes Naboth's Vineyard, 1 Kings 21:1-16

R. G. Lee, the legendary Baptist preacher from Memphis, Tennessee, preached a dramatic sermon regarding this scripture hundreds of times before conventions, pastors' conferences, and evangelistic rallies, always with the same timeless appeal. Lee called his sermon, "Payday Someday!"

Verse 1 sets the scene in Jezreel where the king and queen apparently had another royal residence as a winter retreat from the colder elevations of Samaria. Naboth refused to release his vineyard to his next-door neighbor not because Ahab's offer was unfair but because he considered the sale a violation of the biblical law of inherited land. Surely a handful of silver would sway anybody. But the brusque, flat refusal of sturdy Naboth, showing there was still some independence in Israel, sent Ahab into another of his childish pouting moods.

Attempting to lift his spirits, Jezebel goaded Ahab with the statement in verse 7, which literally means "you now, do kingdom over Israel." Because of her upbringing in the absolutist monarchy of the Phoenician court, she was used to a dictatorial leadership style. She decided to take matters into her own hands and show Ahab how her strong father, King Ethbaal, would have handled such a matter in Tyre.

Her scheme involved the bribing of false witnesses to frame Naboth with a capital crime, getting him legally prosecuted and finally executed. Since the property of public criminals in the ancient East reverted to the crown, Ahab would have his vineyard.

1 KINGS 21:17-22:40

Elijah Condemns Ahab, 1 Kings 21:17-29

Elijah, the colorful prophet from Tishbeh, enters the picture again after the long interlude since chapter 18 when he was last mentioned. In this passage God sends him to Jezreel to confront the wicked King Ahab for the second time. God wanted Elijah to catch Ahab red-handed, in the very act of confiscating the murdered Naboth's property. Without the slightest tinge of guilt, Ahab had rushed next door to claim his new toy. Instead he found there, standing by the vineyard gate, waiting for him – dark-browed, motionless, grim – the prophet whom he had not seen for years. As usual, Elijah had appeared with dramatic suddenness, this time like an incarnate conscience, to judge the king for the last time. Elijah's words are harsh: "In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, dogs shall lick your blood, even yours."

After two verses of editorial comment about Ahab's evil reign, the writer then tells us that Ahab, convicted by Elijah's condemnation, repented. His repentance was exhibited by four customary actions: (1) he tore his clothes, (2) he wore sackcloth next to his body, (3) he fasted, (4) he "went about mourning." The repentance was apparently genuine, if not long-lasting, so God tempered His wrath with mercy by delaying the total destruction of Ahab's dynasty until Jehu killed his sons in 2 Kings 9:1-10:28.

The last time they met, Ahab had called Elijah “O troubler of Israel” (18:7). Now Elijah is “O my enemy.”

Ahab is Warned by Micaiah, 1 Kings 22:1-28

In the zig-zag pattern used to switch his story back and forth between Israel and Judah, the writer left Judah at 15:24, after outlining the reign of Asa. Next he picks up the story of Judah again at 22:41 with the reign of Jehoshaphat, Asa’s son. But before coming to that, he is forced to introduce Jehoshaphat prematurely in this section in order to complete the account of Ahab.

The three-year period in verse 1 is measured from the second defeat of Ben-Hadad at Aphek, described in chapter 20.

Ramoth Gilead, Ben-Hadad’s fortress commanding the approach to Israel and Judah from Transjordan, had been ceded to Israel by treaty following Syria’s surrender at Aphek. Presumably, Ben-Hadad had treacherously refused to give up the city, and it was still in Syrian hands. Jehoshaphat, the ruler of the Southern Kingdom, agreed to help Ahab regain the fortress.

Curiously, after making his decision, Jehoshaphat then requested that an inquiry be made about God’s will in the matter. The order should have been reversed. He should have sought the will of God first.

A few commentaries associate the four hundred prophets in verse 6 with Jezebel’s prophets of Baal, some of whom might have survived the massacre at Mount Carmel. But more than likely they were prophets of Ahab’s adulterated version of Yahweh worship, which held that Baal and Asherah could be worshiped along with Yahweh and that calf-images were permissible worship-aids.

Jehoshaphat, who was more at home with the traditional form of Yahweh worship, was not satisfied with the authenticity of Ahab’s four hundred courtesans. Ahab reluctantly mentioned Micaiah as an exception to the popular trend in prophets.

Apart from what is related here, nothing is known about Micaiah. His meeting with the two kings in the wide-open arena of the threshing floor at the gate of Samaria must have been a dramatic scene. The two kings in their splendid regalia, the four hundred crowd-pleasing prophets of Ahab, the false prophet Zedekiah wearing bull’s horns to act out his reassurance that Ahab would “gore the Syrians,” the curious spectators taking it all in.

At first it appeared that Micaiah had yielded to their plea not to make waves by giving a negative report to the king. When asked for his advice, he repeated the same ingratiating encouragement the other four hundred prophets had given the king in verse 6: “Go and prosper, for the Lord will deliver it into the hand of the king!” (v. 15). But even Ahab recognized that Micaiah was mocking them all with biting irony and sarcasm. He was mimicking the baseless optimism of the smooth-talking court preachers of Samaria.

After a royal reprimand, Micaiah unleashed the painful truth on the two kings and the followers. Just as Ahab expected, the truth was bad news. “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as

sheep that have no shepherd” (v. 17). In the vision God asked for a volunteer from among the host to go to Ahab and influence him to disregard Micaiah’s prophecy and attack Syria so “that he may fall at Ramoth Gilead” (v. 20). After a brief discussion, one of the group around the throne volunteered a plan. The volunteer is identified in verse 21 as “a spirit.” This is not satan, nor an evil spirit, but an angelic being, perhaps a prophetic spirit who was also responsible for calling the prophets, inspiring them, authenticating their predictions, and distinguishing them from lying prophets.

Zedekiah, who must have been a spokesman for the four hundred false prophets, perhaps still wearing his foolish manmade bull horns, rushed forward, incensed, and slapped Micaiah. Micaiah is then returned to the custody of Amon and Joash, where he apparently was being held under some kind of arrest. Amon is identified as the governor of Samaria, but Joash is not known.

Ahab Is Slain in Battle, 1 Kings 22:29-40

Flying in the face of Micaiah’s warning, the two kings rallied their two armies for an assault on Ramoth Gilead. Even though he despised Micaiah, Ahab knew better than to totally disregard his words. He decided to take some precautions as the better part of wisdom. So the king devised a plan to disguise himself and go into battle as a common charioteer. An anonymous Syrian archer shot an arrow at random, striking the disguised Ahab in a tiny, vulnerable seam in his armor. As the sun was going down, the cry went up that the king was dead. Israel retreated, bearing their slain leader back to Samaria.

As Elijah had predicted, when Ahab’s bloody chariot was washed at a pool in Samaria, the dogs were there to lick his blood.

1 KINGS 22:41-53

Jehoshaphat’s Reign Summarized, 1 Kings 22:41-50

Having concluding his long narrative of Israel’s king Ahab, including the stories of the prophet Elijah, the writer in typical fashion now switches his story back to Judah, picking up where he left off in 1 Kings 15:24 with Asa’s death. While waiting to come back to Judah, he has told of Israel’s suffering through the turbulent reigns of seven kings and one pretender: Jeroboam, Nadab, Baasha, Elah, Zimri, Omri (and Tibni), and Ahab. Now Ahab is dead, and the writer returns to Judah’s history. Asa’s forty years on the throne in Jerusalem came to an end with his death from natural causes, and his son Jehoshaphat was crowned in his place (v. 41).

Because of his involvement in Ahab’s war against the Syrians, Jehoshaphat had to be introduced ahead of time in 1 Kings 22:2. However, the writer, following his outline, still wanted to complete the story of Ahab before beginning the account of another southern king. So he withheld the usual introductory information about Jehoshaphat until he reached the proper position in the sequence.

Several interesting features appear in Jehoshaphat’s introduction in verses 41-42. This is the first time a king’s age has been noted at the beginning of his reign. From now on this is the usual pattern in the stories of the kings of Judah.

Another unusual feature of the story of Jehoshaphat is its brevity. Even though he was an important historical figure and continued the long and stable dynasty of his father Asa by reigning for twenty-five years, Jehoshaphat is given only ten verses for his story. This is one of several places where it seems evident that the author is more interested in telling about the kings of Israel than the kings of Judah. With special glee he catalogues the sins of Israel's rulers in embarrassing detail, while only hitting the high spots of the transgressions of the southern monarchs.

Even though Asa's moral reforms were impressive, they were not absolute. Asa had not destroyed all the "high places" (1 Kings 15:14). Now Jehoshaphat was also guilty of this same shortcoming (v. 43). Because the Canaanites had practiced their pagan rituals (including human sacrifices) on the mountain tops of Palestine, God has ordered the children of Israel to destroy these abominable shrines on the high places:

You shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you,
destroy all their engraved stones, destroy their molded images, and
demolish all their high places.

(Numbers 33:52)

Jehoshaphat's report card is marked down because he, like his father, allowed the people to worship Yahweh on the "high places" (v. 43).

Jehoshaphat is also condemned because he "made peace with the king of Israel" (v. 44). This could refer in a general way to his peaceful relations with all the kings in Israel during his reign: Ahab, Ahaziah, and Jehoram. But the writer probably had in mind the specific alliance Jehoshaphat made with Ahab of Israel during his war with Syria (1 Kings 22:2). God's displeasure with this alliance is mentioned in 2 Chronicles 18:1 where the marriage of Jehoshaphat's son to the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel is identified as the main complaint.

With the exception of his lax attitude toward the high places and his peace treaty with Ahab, Jehoshaphat is given good marks by the writer. "He walked in all the ways of his father Asa," who also ranked high in the writer's judgment, and he did "what was right in the eyes of the Lord" (v. 43). Jehoshaphat banished the sacred prostitutes who remained after his father's incomplete campaign against them (v. 46). Furthermore, he is commended for his military efforts (v. 45), his continued subjection of Edom (v. 47), and his ill-fated attempt to reestablish Judah's trade routes to Ophir (vv. 48-49).

In verse 47, the nation of Edom is mentioned for the first time since 1 Kings 11:14-17. Since David's conquest of their territory years earlier, the Edomites had been denied the right to have a regular king. Jehoshaphat apparently reestablished this policy, ruling Edom through his appointed deputy. Later, during the reign of Jehoram, the Edomites revolted against Judah and appointed their own king.

Because Edom was under his subjection and no longer posed a threat to Judah, Jehoshaphat could renew the shipping trade to the south that Solomon had established years earlier. So he built a fleet of merchant ships for this purpose. The word translated “merchant ships” in verse 48 is literally “Tarshish ships,” a term given to the large oceangoing vessels that sailed to the mines of the far west. According to 2 Chronicles 20:36, Jehoshaphat built his ships at the port of Ezion Geber, so they apparently never left the harbor where they were launched. How the ships were wrecked is not described, but in 2 Chronicles 20:35-37 we are told that the shipping accident was a punishment from God because He was displeased with Jehoshaphat’s alliance with Ahaziah, Ahab’s son.

Like his father Asa, Jehoshaphat died of natural causes and was buried in Jerusalem following a long and, for the most part, godly reign. After the usual concluding formula, the writer mentions that Jehoshaphat’s son Jehoram took his place on the throne of Judah (v. 50). However, he does not continue with the account of the new king here. He must now switch back to Israel and catch up with what has happened in the Northern Kingdom during Jehoshaphat’s rule in Judah.

Ahaziah’s Reign Summarized, 1 Kings 22:51-53

In 1 Kings 16:29, the writer began his story of Ahab, king of Israel, with a brief opening statement. Then he abruptly inserted a long section dealing with the life of Elijah before concluding the history of Ahab in chapter 22. In telling the story of Ahab’s son Ahaziah, the writer follows the same pattern. He introduces Ahaziah briefly in the last three verses of 1 Kings and then turns aside to describe an incident in the life of Elijah before returning to conclude Ahaziah’s story in 2 Kings 1:17-18.

Here, at what most scholars believe is an awkward place, the book of 1 Kings ends, and the rest of the story of Ahaziah is arbitrarily pushed forward into 2 Kings. 1 and 2 Kings were originally a single unit in the Hebrew Bible. The book was not divided into 1 and 2 Kings until the fifteenth century under the influence of the Greek and Latin versions. The division was made at 1 Kings 22:53, probably in order to fit the book equally on two scrolls. A division at 1 Kings 22:50 or at 2 Kings 1:18 would have avoided the awkwardness of splitting Ahaziah’s reign.