

Living like a King

Jeroboam the Son of Nebat

There were two kings of Israel named Jeroboam but the first is nearly always described as the one “*which made Israel to sin*”. He was the first king of the divided kingdom of Israel but it need not have been like that. Jeroboam became king because of Solomon’s foolish behaviour.

The LORD said to Solomon, “Since this has been your practice and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and will give it to your servant” (1 Kings 11:11).

Divided Kingdom

That servant was Jeroboam. He received the promise from God through the prophet Ahijah who said: ‘*Behold, I am about to tear the kingdom from the hand of Solomon and will give you ten tribes*’ (11:30–31).

It was a clear demonstration to Jeroboam that the LORD God had lost patience with Solomon, who had promised so much, but had failed to follow up on his earlier potential. Solomon forgot that he should have been true to God.

The prophecy given to Jeroboam became known to Solomon, and he fled for safety to Egypt, as the young Lord Jesus was later to do with Joseph and Mary. It was only after Solomon had died that Jeroboam knew it was safe to return.

Foolish King

When King Solomon died, Rehoboam his son went from Jerusalem to Shechem for it was there that he

would be installed as king. Jeroboam became the spokesman for the people, asking that the hard service which the nation had endured under Solomon should be made easier. Initially Rehoboam acted well, asking for three days so that he could consult his advisors. Sadly he did not accept the good advice given by the older men but heeded the younger ones and told his subjects:

My little finger is thicker than my father’s thighs. And now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions (v10–11).

This was no recipe for popularity nor was it a way to ensure the unity of the kingdom. The majority of the people decided they could do better, and ten tribes defected to make Jeroboam their king. The result was that Solomon’s kingdom was split in two: the kingdom of Judah in the south and Israel in the north.

False Worship

Jeroboam should have been able to begin his reign secure in the knowledge that the division of the kingdom was part of God’s overall plan, but no:

Jeroboam said in his heart, “Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the LORD at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah” (1 Kings 12:26–27).

Perhaps it was only natural, if the people followed the commands of God and went to Jerusalem three times each year to worship they would inevitably see how things fared in Judah, and might think that the grass was greener there than in Israel. Such thinking was to ignore the detail of the promise which God had made to him.

“I will take you, and you shall reign over all that your soul desires, and you shall be king over Israel. And if you will listen to all that I command you, and will walk in my ways, and do what is right in my eyes by keeping my statutes and my commandments, as David my servant did, I will be with you and will build you a sure house, as I built for David, and I will give Israel to you” (1 Kings 11:37-38).

Jeroboam should have remembered this. If he knew what would happen when the people went south to worship, so did God. If he knew they might be attracted by things in Judah, so did God. He would have made provision for this. He had promised Jeroboam a sure house, a long line of descendants, as he had promised to David. Jeroboam did not believe God. He trusted in his own wisdom, always a fatal mistake.

So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, *“You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (1 Kings 12:28)*

It was almost a re-run of what happened in the wilderness not long after the nation had left Egypt. Moses had stayed on the mountain longer than the people had expected, and they had demanded that Aaron do something about it.

“And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” (Exodus 32:4).

They knew the calf had not taken them out of Egypt, but closed their minds to the truth.

Bad Start

Henry Ford is reputed to have said “History is bunk”, but it can give some idea of what might happen in a given set of circumstances. Jeroboam should have known what happened after Aaron was responsible for a golden calf. God’s anger was roused. He had said to Moses:

“Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you” (Exodus 32:10).

It was not likely that He would view any more favourably the golden calves made by Jeroboam. This is the great lesson from his life: we need to listen carefully to what God says, and act upon it. The record tells us that *“this thing became a sin”*, and from then on the reign of Jeroboam declined.

His son Nadab followed him on the throne, but he was the last of the line of Jeroboam, and the nation of Israel suffered from continual changes of dynasty for the rest of its history. For many of those kings the epithet was true, they followed in all the ways of Jeroboam the son of Nebat *“which made Israel to sin”*.

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Quotations from the ESV