

Ancient Hebrew History: The Two Kingdoms

(c.920 BCE - 597 BCE)

Background

The experiment with the opulence and power of the great eastern kingdoms had ended in disaster for Israel. King Solomon created the wealthiest and most powerful central government the Hebrews would ever see, but he did so at an impossibly high cost. Land was given away to pay for his extravagances and people were sent into forced labor into Tyre in the north. When Solomon died, between 926 and 922 BCE, the ten northern tribes refused to submit to his son, Rehoboam, and revolted.

From this point on, there would be two kingdoms of Hebrews: in the north - Israel, and in the south - Judah. The Israelites formed their capital in the city of Samaria, and the Judaeans kept their capital in Jerusalem. These kingdoms remained separate states for over two hundred years.

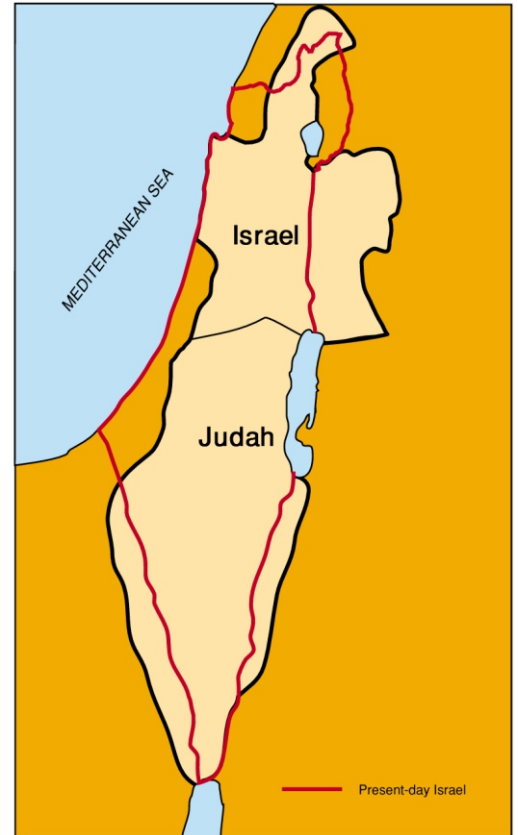
The history of the both kingdoms is a litany of ineffective, disobedient, and corrupt kings. When the Hebrews had first asked for a king, in the book of Judges, they were told that only God was their king. When they approached Samuel the Prophet, he told them the desire for a king was an act of disobedience and that they would pay dearly if they established a monarchy. The history told in the Hebrew book, Kings, bears out Samuel's warning.

The Hebrew empire eventually collapses, Moab successfully revolts against Judah, and Ammon successfully secedes from Israel. Within a century of Solomon's death, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were left as tiny little states - no bigger than Connecticut - on the larger map of the Middle East.

As history proved time and again in the region, tiny states never survived long. Located directly between the Mesopotamian kingdoms in the northeast and powerful Egypt in the southwest, the Hebrew Kingdoms were of the utmost commercial and military importance to all these warring powers. Being small was a liability.

The Conquest of Israel

In 722 BC, the Assyrians conquered Israel. The Assyrians were aggressive and effective; the history of their dominance over the Middle East is a history of constant warfare. In order to assure that conquered territories would remain pacified, the Assyrians would force many of the native inhabitants to relocate to other parts of their empire. They almost always chose the upper



The Divided Kingdom,
10th - 6th Century BCE

and more powerful classes, for they had no reason to fear the general mass of a population. They would then send Assyrians to relocate in the conquered territory.

When they conquered Israel, they forced the ten tribes to scatter throughout their empire. For all practical purposes, you might consider this a proto-Diaspora ("diaspora"="scattering"), except that these Israelites disappear from history permanently; they are called "the ten lost tribes of Israel." Why this happened is difficult to assess. The Assyrians did not settle the Israelites in one place, but scattered them in small populations all over the Middle East. When the Babylonians later conquered Judah, they, too, relocate a massive amount of the population. However, they move that population to a single location so that the Hebrews can set up a separate community and still retain their religion and identity. The Israelites deported by the Assyrians, however, do not live in separate communities and soon drop their Yahweh religion and their Hebrew names and identities.

The Samaritans

One other consequence of the Assyrian invasion of Israel involved the settling of Israel by Assyrians. This group settled in the capital of Israel, Samaria, and they took with them Assyrian gods and cultic practices. But the people of the Middle East were above everything else highly superstitious. Even the Hebrews didn't necessarily deny the existence or power of other peoples' gods—just in case. Conquering peoples constantly feared that the local gods would wreak vengeance on them. Therefore, they would adopt the local god or gods into their religion and cultic practices.

Within a short time, the Assyrians in Samaria were worshipping Yahweh as well as their own gods; within a couple centuries, they would be worshipping Yahweh exclusively. Thus was formed the only major schism in the Yahweh religion: the schism between the Hebrews and the Samaritans. The Samaritans, who were Assyrian and therefore non-Hebrew, adopted almost all of the Hebrew Torah and cultic practices; unlike the Hebrews, however, they believed that they could sacrifice to God outside of the temple in Jerusalem. The Hebrews frowned on the Samaritans, denying that a non-Hebrew had any right to be included among the chosen people and angered that the Samaritans would dare to sacrifice to Yahweh outside of Jerusalem. The Samaritan schism played a major role in the rhetoric of Yeshua; and there are still Samaritans alive today around the city of Samaria.

The Conquest of Judah

"There but for the grace of god go I." Certainly, the conquest of Israel scared the people and monarchs of Judah. They barely escaped the Assyrian menace, but Judah would be conquered by the Chaldeans about a century later. In 701, the Assyrian Sennacherib would gain territory from Judah, and the Hebrews would have suffered the same fate as the Israelites. But by 625 BC, the Babylonians, under Nabopolassar, would reassert control over Mesopotamia, and the Hebrew king Josiah aggressively sought to extend his territory in the power vacuum that resulted. But Judah soon fell victim to the power struggles between Assyrians, Babylonians, and Egyptians. When Josiah's son, Jehoahaz, became king, the king of Egypt, Necho (put into power by the Assyrians), rushed into Judah and deposed him, and Judah became a tribute state of Egypt. When the Babylonians defeated the Egyptians in 605 BC, then Judah became a tribute

state to Babylon. But when the Babylonians suffered a defeat in 601 BC, the king of Judah, Jehoiakim, defected to the Egyptians. So the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, raised an expedition to punish Judah in 597 BC. The new king of Judah, Jehoiachin, handed the city of Jerusalem over to Nebuchadnezzar, who then appointed a new king over Judah, Zedekiah. In line with Mesopotamian practice, Nebuchadnezzar deported around 10,000 Hebrews to his capital in Babylon; all the deportees were drawn from professionals, the wealthy, and craftsmen. Ordinary people were allowed to stay in Judah. This deportation was the beginning of the Exile.

The story should have ended there. However, Zedekiah defected from the Babylonians one more time. Nebuchadnezzar responded with another expedition in 588 and conquered Jerusalem in 586. Nebuchadnezzar caught Zedekiah and forced him to watch the murder of his sons; then he blinded him and deported him to Babylon. Again, Nebuchadnezzar deported the prominent citizens, but the number was far smaller than in 597: somewhere between 832 and 1577 people were deported.

The Hebrew kingdom, started with such promise and glory by David, was now at an end. It would never appear again, except for a brief time in the second century BC, and to the Hebrews forced to relocate and the Jews left to scratch out a living in their once proud kingdom, it seemed as if no Jewish nation would ever exist again. It also seemed as if the special bond that Yahweh had promised to the Hebrews, the covenant that the Hebrews would serve a special place in history, had been broken and forgotten by their god. This period of confusion and despair, a community together but homeless in the streets of Babylon, makes up one of the most significant historical periods in Jewish history: the Exile.

Sources: The Hebrews: A Learning Module from Washington State University, ©Richard Hooker, reprinted by permission.