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A Divided Monarchy – The Book of Kings, Part 2

The Temple of Solomon

Building the first temple in Jerusalem was Solomon's biggest achievement. Yet he did so in spite of YHWH's original command to David *not* to. In order to build the temple, Solomon also instituted forced labor practices for the first time in Israel. This was part of his larger administrative reform efforts attempting to "modernize" Israel's kingship.

The temple's structure was similar to others found in ancient near eastern cities during this period. It served as a nexus for royal and divine powers. The temple was meant to be God's main dwelling place. According to the text, YHWH's name lives inside. Because the king built the temple, however, it was essentially under his control. From the Deuteronomistic Historian's perspective, this was a problem.

A Divided Monarchy

After Solomon's death, the united monarchy split into two separate kingdoms: Israel (North) and Judah (South). Prior to David's reign, the region had always been separated into two different kingdoms. From this perspective, the united monarchy was a historical oddity. There were various historical causes for the split, including Solomon's forced labor and the memory of independence in the northern kingdom. The Bible attributes it to Solomon's many foreign wives and the apostasies he committed in his old age.

Another contributing factor in Israel's split was the temperament of Solomon's son and successor, Rehoboam. After successfully achieving power, Rehoboam decides to double-down on some of Solomon's harsh policies. For example, instead of repealing forced labor laws from Solomon's rule, Rehoboam works the people even harder. The text depicts an egotistical young king with one of the most famous lines of scripture: "My little finger is thicker than my father's loins" (1 Kings 12:10).

A young man named Jeroboam who Solomon entrusted with political responsibility leads a revolt against Rehoboam's oppressive rule and is named king of the northern kingdom of Israel.

Jeroboam builds two new sanctuaries in the northern kingdom—one at Dan and one at Bethel. He then puts a golden calf inside of each sanctuary. Although these calves were not necessarily

intended to represent foreign deities, it is hard to know to what degree such symbols were understood as representing YHWH versus other gods. For example, golden calves often represented deities in Canaan.

Jeroboam says that the temples were intended to ensure that people in the northern kingdom would not have to travel South to the temple in Judah. Regardless, establishing alternative worship sites was a direct violation of Deuteronomic law. This became known as "the sin of Jeroboam." Every northern king thereafter was judged as sinful for having temples outside of Jerusalem.

Northern & Southern Kingdoms

The dust seems to settle after the kingdoms finally split. With the exception of a few small conflicts, Israel and Judah operate independently. The northern kingdom of Israel was likely the more powerful kingdom between the two. The northern dynasty (house of Omri) is mentioned in Syrian inscriptions and other Mesopotamian documents, which indicates that their city had political significance in the surrounding region.

The idea that the northern kingdom was most powerful might be counterintuitive given the biblical tradition's emphasis on Jerusalem and the Davidic line of succession. Yet the archaeological and historiographical evidence suggests that the North was more Powerful than the South. King Omri is credited with founding the northern dynasty and also builds up Samaria. King Ahab follows Omri. Ahab was a relatively successful northern king with a long reign. Because the Deuteronomistic Historian favors the southern kingdom, Ahab's success could be part of why he is portrayed so negatively in the Bible.

The Deuteronomistic Historian particularly disliked King Ahab because of his marriage to Jezebel, a foreign queen. In keeping with a typical pattern, Jezebel's foreignness leads her husband to begin worshiping other gods. It is rare to find such a strong female lead character in the Bible who wields significant political power. In the Bible, however, she is portrayed as a complete villain. Jezebel's name continues to carry symbolic significance today and is often levied as an insult against women who wield political power today.

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