

I & II KINGS

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WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

spoke against Baasha by Jehu the prophet, ¹³for all the sins of Baasha and the sins of Elah his son which they sinned, and which they made Israel to sin, provoking the Lord God of Israel to anger with their idols. ¹⁴Now the rest of the acts of Elah, and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel?

¹⁵In the twenty-seventh year of Asa king of Judah, Zimri reigned seven days in Tirzah. Now the troops were encamped against Gibbethon, which belonged to the Philistines, ¹⁶and the troops who were encamped heard it said, ¹⁷"Zimri has conspired, and he has killed the king"; therefore all Israel made Omri, the commander of the army, king over Israel that day in the camp. ¹⁸So Omri went up from Gibbethon, and all Israel with him, and they besieged Tirzah.

¹⁹And when Zimri saw that the city was taken, he went into the citadel of the king's house, and burned the king's house over him with fire, and died, ²⁰because of his sins which he committed, doing evil in the sight of the Lord, walking in the way of Jeroboam, and for his sin which he committed, making Israel to sin. ²¹Now the rest of the acts of Zimri, and the conspiracy which he made, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel?

²²Then the people of Israel were divided into two parts; half of the people followed Tibni, the son of Ginath, to make him king, and half followed Omri. ²³But the people who followed Omri overcame the people who followed Tibni the son of Ginath; so Tibni died, and Omri became king. ²⁴In the thirty-first year of Asa king of Judah, Omri began to reign over Israel, and reigned for twelve years; six years he reigned in Tirzah. ²⁵He bought the hill of Samaria from Shemer for two talents of silver; and he fortified the hill, and called the name of the city which he built, Samaria, after the name of Shemer, the owner of the hill.

²⁶Omri did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did more evil than all who were before him. ²⁷For he walked in all the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and in the sins which he made Israel to sin, provoking the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger by their idols. ²⁸Now the rest of the acts of Omri which he did, and the might that he showed, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel? ²⁹And Omri slept with his fathers, and was buried in Samaria; and Ahab his son reigned in his stead.

³⁰In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab the son of Omri began to reign over Israel, and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years. ³¹And Ahab the son of

Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all that were before him. ³²And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him. ³³He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. ³⁴And Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him. ³⁵In his days Hiel of Bethel built Jericho; he laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the Lord, which he spoke by Joshua the son of Nun.

NINE KINGS OF JUDAH AND ISRAEL II— COMMENTARY

1 Kings 15:1-16:34 (*con'd*)

(i)

For many less sympathetic readers these two chapters represent 'quintessential Kings'. Nine monarchs are passed over—if not in silence then at least more than succinctly—at an average of seven and a half verses per head! No attempt is made to assess the character of each, as a historian or biographer might. And this is all the more disappointing after the deft characterizations we have all enjoyed of Saul, David, Solomon, and even Rehoboam and Jeroboam.

Part of the explanation may simply be the availability of information to our historian—or the lack of it—some four centuries after these kings reigned. For details on those kings whose actions had not lived on in the ripples of popular storytelling the historian had to depend on the terse entries from the archives. We all know his situation well. Any Scot knows many stories about King Robert the Bruce, but would be hard pressed to say much about his immediate successors. Everyone knows about King Henry VIII and his matrimonial troubles, but much less about his Tudor forebears. Some characters of our own times too are much larger than their entries in the archives—for others we have to content ourselves with the cryptic entries in *Who's Who*.

Before we content ourselves with that explanation, we have to note at least that the author of Chronicles did find more to say about many of the kings of Judah. Yet few of his special narratives have the force of those in Kings: they seem to be more 'pious legends' than 'good stories'! But there is another and more positive reason too for our author's approach in Kings. The title we use for these books is not his: we have already remarked that *Kings and Prophets* or *Why did Jerusalem Fall?* might have been more suitable. He is concerned to show that that final collapse had age-old causes that went back almost to the roots of monarchy in Judah and Israel. Already in the time of Jeroboam and Rehoboam his people were set on course for disaster. Detailed documentation of all their successors, even if it were to hand, is hardly necessary.

(ii)

Rehoboam's two successors in Judah (Abijam and Asa) spanned almost half a century. The Chronicler makes a lot of the war between the first of these and Jeroboam (2 Chron. 13): Judah's resounding victory is punishment for Israel's apostasy. For our historian, Abijam is only tolerated for the sake of his great-grandfather; he himself is no better than his bad father. Both accounts will tell us a lot about the views of their authors, and how little hard information they had.

Their estimates vary too over the long reign of Asa. For our author, Asa is a good king, almost without qualification. He undid most of the religious wrongs of his predecessors: although sanctuaries other than the Jerusalem Temple were retained, Judah's religion was purged of idols—even at the cost of his own mother's removal from court. The burning of her sacred pole by the waters of the Kidron (15:13) reminds us of the fate of the golden calf in Deuteronomy 9:21. No value is put on his warring with Baasha of Israel "all their days" (v.32). No blame is attached even to the ailment in his "feet" in his old age (v.23). But for the Chronicler (2 Chron. chs. 14-16) Asa starts well and then declines. The wars with the north begin only after thirty-five years peace, and are marred by Asa buying Syrian

help. His ailment is only one symptom of his loss of trust in the Lord.

(iii)

These two chapters, (1 Kings 15-16), partly through the 'accident' of Asa's long reign, provide us with a typical first impression of the greater stability of the ongoing house of David in Judah when compared with the regular dynastic upsets in northern Israel. For the several kings of Israel in the same half-century we have to rely only on the testimony of Kings: the northern apostates are only given passing mention in Chronicles when they impinge directly on the affairs of Judah.

Several of these short scenes from Israel aptly illustrate the principle that the sins of the fathers are visited on the sons. Rehoboam had to settle Solomon's account; and the model was followed. Jeroboam's son Nadab (vv.25-27) failed in the eyes of our historian to live up to the promise of his name, which means 'generous' or 'noble': he did not give up his father's religious innovations. Baasha overthrew him when in the field against Israel's arch-enemy, the Philistines—and proceeded to root out the whole family (v.29).

He himself was to reign for nearly a quarter-century, but made no alteration to his victim's religious policy. Accordingly Jehu ben-Hanani repeats against him precisely the threat made by Ahijah against Jeroboam (16:2ff.). And the threat is executed in similar fashion—on Baasha's son Elah. Baasha himself comes to a peaceful death and burial. Verse 7 of 1 Kings 16 is worth pondering. Baasha came under judgment, not for destroying the house of Jeroboam, but for doing so and being no better himself. We might compare Amos's denunciation of Israel (Amos chs. 1-2) for being no better than the nations around her.

Elah (vv.8ff.) is not with his troops outside Philistine Gibeon when Zimri disposes of him, but is a drunken guest of his own royal chamberlain. However, the army in the field were to have nothing to do with the usurper: a quick march to Tirzah and a short seige of the capital led to his suicide (v.18) after only

seven days. The situation remained unstable, with Tibni ruling over part of Israel; but the army's candidate Omri finally had the upper hand.

The rich court of Omri and his son Ahab provides the background to the career of Elijah, and we shall discuss them more fully in the portions that follow. Here we note simply that Elijah enters the stage as the divine response to the king, "[who] did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him" (16:33).

ELIJAH INTRODUCED

1 Kings 17:1-24

¹Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." ²And the word of the Lord came to him, ³"Depart from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, that is east of the Jordan. ⁴You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." ⁵So he went and did according to the word of the Lord; he went and dwelt by the brook Cherith that is east of the Jordan. ⁶And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the brook. ⁷And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

⁸Then the word of the Lord came to him, ⁹"Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you." ¹⁰So he arose and went to Zarephath; and when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks; and he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink." ¹¹And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." ¹²And she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a cruse; and now, I am gathering a couple of sticks, that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." ¹³And Elijah said to her, "Fear not; go and do as you have said, but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make for yourself and your son." ¹⁴For thus says the Lord

the God of Israel, 'The jar of meal shall not be spent, and the cruse of oil shall not fail, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.'" ¹⁵And she went and did as Elijah said; and she, and he, and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶The jar of meal was not spent, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord which he spoke by Elijah.

¹⁷After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; and his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. ¹⁸And she said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" ¹⁹And he said to her, "Give me your son." And he took him from her bosom, and carried him up into the upper chamber, where he lodged, and laid him upon his own bed. ²⁰And he cried to the Lord, "O Lord my God, hast thou brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?" ²¹Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried to the Lord, "O Lord my God, let this child's soul come into him again." ²²And the Lord hearkened to the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived. ²³And Elijah took the child, and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and delivered him to his mother; and Elijah said, "See, your son lives." ²⁴And the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth."

(i)

We encounter here one of the Bible's most majestic figures. The Elijah traditions are not extensive: they occupy only the next few chapters of our text. But the 'hero' they sketch is commanding, and even monumental, without ceasing for a moment to be utterly human, and even fragile. The last words of our Old Testament (Mal. 4:5-6) denote an expectation of his return before the coming day of the Lord; and he is a wholly worthy precursor of Jesus of Nazareth in point of comparison.

Elijah is an outsider in the capital. Gilead is away on the other (eastern) side of the Jordan, and Tishbe we know only as Elijah's home. When he confronts King Ahab in all the magnificence we now know was Samaria, his status comes not from his background but from his God. "Before whom I stand" (v. 1) is his claim to authority: it is a technical phrase used of a king's