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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNIT 19: DIVIDED KINGDOMS

TEXTBOOK READINGS:

Read chapter 12 “2 Kings” in *Discovering the Bible*.

Read chapters 22 “Asa,” 23 Hezekiah,” and 24 “Josiah,” in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*.

BIBLICAL TEXT:

Read the specific texts in 1 and 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles as they are cited in the following material.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

After the death of Solomon, his son Rehoboam became king of all Israel (1 Kings 11:42-43). But when the people requested relief from the heavy burden of taxes which Solomon had imposed, Rehoboam unwisely refused. Angry at this, the ten northern tribes (all except Benjamin and Judah) chose an unrelated man, Jeroboam, from the tribe of Ephraim as their leader and seceded from the kingdom (1 Kings 12:1-19). Although God promised Jeroboam stability and continuity for the northern tribes if they were obedient, they failed miserably in this. In order to keep his people from worshipping in Jerusalem where they might be influenced to return to Rehoboam, Jeroboam instituted the worship of golden calves at Bethel and Dan (see Note 1) – in the northern and southern areas of his kingdom – and even brought in new priests and established new holy days to replace those God had given Israel (1 Kings 12:26-33). This foolish act of political expediency led to total apostasy on the part of the northern tribes and their eventual destruction.

Around the time of the division between the northern ten tribes and the southern two tribes (from this point known as the kingdoms of “Israel” and “Judah,” respectively), the Egyptian pharaoh Shoshenq I (c. 943–922 BC) – called Shishak in the Bible (1 Kings 11:40; 14:25; and 2 Chronicles 12:2-9) – launched a military campaign against Judah and its surrounding nations in 925 BC. Egyptian texts record this invasion of Shoshenq (see Note 2), and the Bible confirms that he carried out a successful raid against Jerusalem, plundering most of the treasures of the temple built by Solomon.

Before he was made king of the northern tribes, Jeroboam had fled to Egypt to escape Solomon, and Shoshenq had welcomed him there as a potentially useful tool in the power balance of the area. Once Solomon died and Jeroboam returned to Israel to lead the northern tribes, Shoshenq knew that Israel was divided and he was easily able to overcome the two southern tribes. Some Egyptologists feel that the many tons of gold and silver gifted to Egyptian temples in the first years of Shoshenq's successor, Osorkon I, came from Shoshenq's looting of the Jerusalem temple.

After their split, Judah and Israel co-existed for about two centuries with their capitals at Jerusalem and Samaria (see Note 3) respectively. In all, nineteen kings ruled over the “house” or kingdom of Israel, and nineteen kings (plus one queen) ruled over the house of Judah. Sadly, the Bible reports that all the kings of Israel were evil, and of the nineteen kings of Judah we are told that only half of them (Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Amaziah, Azariah, Jotham, Hezekiah, and Josiah) were good – in fact only a couple were consistently good. It was during this time that God sent numerous prophets (to be discussed in the next course unit) to both kingdoms to reprove them for their sins and to warn them of punishment and exile if they did not repent. For the most part both kingdoms ignored the warnings, and much of the history of Israel and Judah is fraught with warfare and eventual destruction.

During their time of co-existence, Israel and Judah often fought against each other and sometimes fought or allied with other nations in the region – a fact for which we have specific archaeological documentation. For example, in the ninth century BC, the kingdom of Israel fought against the nearby kingdom of Moab, and a “stele” or stone monument (now in the Louvre Museum in Paris) created by a Moabite king records this specific conflict. Israel also allied itself with the rising Mesopotamian power of Assyria – but not without cost. The so-called “Black Obelisk” of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (859-824 BC) claims Israel severed its alliances with Phoenicia and Judah and became subject to Assyria. The obelisk shows the Israelite king, Jehu (c. 841–814 BC) kissing the ground in front of Shalmaneser and presenting a gift of “much silver” to him. The obelisk, now in the British Museum in London, is dated to 841 BC and is the earliest preserved depiction of an Israelite.

Eventually, in the course of their wars, Judah allied with Assyria, while Israel rebelled against Mesopotamian control and allied with the nearby nation of Aram. As we will see in an upcoming unit, this situation led to the destruction of Israel by the Assyrians in 723 BC and the destruction of Judah by the Assyrians’ rivals, the Babylonians, in 587-6 BC.



Map of the Divided Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Image: Bible History Online

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

Rather than focus on deeds of the many evil kings of the divided monarchies, we will look briefly in this section (and the textbook readings) at the reigns of the good kings of Judah – Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Amaziah, Uzziah, Jotham, Hezekiah and Josiah (see Note 4). For the most part, we will not consider the historical aspects of these kings (many of whom have been archaeologically documented), but simply the Bible’s assessments of them – in order to reach conclusions in the final section of this unit.

ASA, “Healer,” reigned c. 911- 870 BC. Read chapter 22, “Asa” in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*.

JEHOSHAPHAT, “Yahweh has judged,” reigned c. 870 – 849 BC. Like his father, Asa, Jehoshaphat also campaigned against idolatry and – quite remarkably – educated the people in God’s laws both by means of traveling teachers he sent out (2 Chronicles 17:7-9) and through his own efforts! (2 Chronicles 19:4). The Bible summarizes his reign very positively: “The Lord was with Jehoshaphat because he followed the ways of his father David before him ... His heart was devoted to the ways of the Lord” (2 Chronicles 17:3, 6); and “he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord” (2 Chronicles 20:32).

But several times Jehoshaphat made alliances with godless neighbors – including Ahab, one of the very worst kings of Israel. The king also allowed his son to marry Ahab and Jezebel’s wicked daughter, Athaliah, who later killed all the descendants of the Davidic line except for the infant Joash, who was kept hidden from her. Jehoshaphat’s motivation in these alliances may have been to attempt to heal the rift between the divided kingdoms, but his continuing willingness to ally with evil rulers was wrong, nevertheless.

JOASH or JEHOASH, “Yahweh has given,” reigned c. 836–796 BC. Joash was the sole surviving son of King Ahaziah after the massacre of the royal family ordered by his grandmother, the wicked Athaliah. The high priest Jehoiada secretly raised Joash and taught him about God. When Joash was seven years old, Jehoiada led the people in overthrowing Athaliah and crowning Joash as the rightful king. During his reign, Joash restored the temple to its former glory and we are told “Joash did what was right in the eyes of the Lord all the years Jehoiada the priest instructed him. The high places, however, were not removed; the people continued to offer sacrifices and burn incense there” (2 Kings 12:2). As a result, when Jehoiada died, Joash turned from God and fell into pagan idol worship, killed the prophet (Jehoiada’s son!) sent by God to correct him, and was eventually assassinated by his own people (2 Chronicles 24:17-25).

AMAZIAH, “The strength of Yahweh,” reigned 796–767 BC. The son of Joash, Amaziah took the throne after the assassination of his father and reigned for twenty-nine years, twenty-four of which were with the co-regency of his son, Uzziah. Amaziah’s reign is summarized by the Chronicler as “he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, but not wholeheartedly” (2 Chronicles 25:2). We see this mixed dedication, for example, in the way Amaziah followed God’s word in not executing the children of his father’s murderers, but also brought back the idols of his enemies and worshiped them after victory in battle! (2 Chronicles 25:3-4, 14).

UZZIAH, “Yahweh is my strength,” reigned c. 790 – 739 BC. Uzziah (known as Azariah, 1 Kings 15:1-7) was one of Amaziah’s sons (2 Chronicles 26:1). He became king at the age of 16 and reigned for about fifty-two years. His long reign was the most successful since that of Solomon, and he seems to have been guided by a priest or prophet named Zechariah. The prophets Hosea, Isaiah, Amos, and Jonah also functioned during his reign, and Uzziah was faithful to God for many years. We are told that Uzziah “sought God during the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God. As long as he sought the LORD, God gave him success” (2 Chronicles 26:5). But later, when Zechariah died, Uzziah became prideful and burned incense in the temple, which only the priests were permitted to do. As a result, God afflicted the

king with leprosy, and his son Jotham governed the people as co-regent for eight years until his father died (2 Kings 15:5, 7; 2 Chronicles 26:16 - 27:1).

JOTHAM, “Yahweh is perfect,” reigned c. 758–743 BC. The son of King Uzziah, Jotham ruled well and we are told that “He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord” and that he “grew powerful because he walked steadfastly before the LORD his God” (2 Chronicles 27:2, 6), although he failed to remove the local high places used for idol worship and the people continued their idolatrous practices (2 Kings 15:35).

Isaiah, Hosea, and Micah all prophesied during Jotham’s reign (Isaiah 1:1; Hosea 1:1; Micah 1:1), but their prophecies were directed against the people rather than their king. In fact, the Bible nowhere records Jotham as having committed a single sin. Such a situation is a rarity among even the most righteous kings of Judah, but reading between the lines we see that although Jotham himself led a pious life, there is no concrete evidence of his concern for the spiritual condition of his people. It is clear that during the king’s reign the corruption of the Northern Kingdom began to enter Judah, as we see in the words of Isaiah and Micah. Hosea’s references to Judah also indicate that under Jotham’s reign there was a lack of righteousness in the lives and worship of his people. Perhaps we see the same truth in the fact that despite Jotham’s personal godliness, his son Ahaz was an extremely wicked king.

HEZEKIAH, “My strength is Yahweh,” reigned c. 716-697 BC. Read chapter 23 “Hezekiah” in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*.

JOSIAH, “Yahweh has healed,” reigned c. 640-609 BC. Read chapter 24 “Josiah” in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

When we read the biblical accounts of the kings of Judah and Israel, as summarized above, we see several important patterns. First, of course, we see that the only good kings were from Judah. Of these few good kings, only a *very* few were very good! At a practical level we see another pattern. The average length of reign of the good kings was thirty-four years and the average of the wicked kings was only about half that – eighteen years. Many kings of Israel were killed or committed suicide, while only two of Judah’s nineteen kings were killed – one of them for his evil behavior. God’s promises of blessing on kings who followed him were clearly fulfilled in a physical as well as spiritual manner.

The next pattern we find is that in summarizing the reigns of the various monarchs, the Bible uses a consistent benchmark: the example of King David – who was himself far from perfect, yet whose attitude of ongoing repentance and unflinching desire to please God made his life the standard by which other kings were judged. In this way, it was said of each good king, such as Asa, that he: “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as his father David had done” (1 Kings 15:11; etc.), while of unrighteous or mediocre kings such as Abijah it was said that “his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his forefather had been” (1 Kings 15:1-4; etc.).

The assessment is not general, however, and is often very carefully worded. Of Amaziah, for example, we are told: “He *did what was right* in the eyes of the Lord, *but not as his father David had done*” (2 Kings 14:3, emphasis added here and below), showing a mix of success and failure in following God’s ways. And we should notice how the very best of the kings were assessed: of Hezekiah we are told “He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, *just as his father David had done*” (2 Kings 18:3), and of Josiah, “He did what

was right in the eyes of the Lord and *followed completely* the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left” (2 Kings 22:2).

Other characteristics of the good kings are sometimes mentioned, such as following the law or being devoted to God, but comparison to David is the only consistent metric of judgment used by the Bible in assessing the kings because the Bible viewed them all from the perspective of the promised “Son of the Most High” who would eventually rule on David’s throne (Luke 1:32).

There is a final pattern involved in the Bible’s discussion of the kings of Judah and Israel that ties directly to the messianic promise given to David. The book of Kings uses a specific formula for discussing the reigns of the kings who ruled after the division of Solomon’s kingdom. For each of the twenty kings of Judah and the twenty kings of Israel, this formula lists such things as the year the king came to the throne, the length of his reign and a summary of the good and bad aspects of the king’s rule. Additionally, the formula gives us the name of the father of each of the kings – and in some cases, the name of the mother. The listing of kings’ mothers may seem random until we realize there is a distinct and important pattern in which women are listed. No mother is listed for a single king of Israel, but the mothers of all the kings of Judah are given – except for two.

It is in this fact that we see the significance of the listing of royal mothers. The two kings of Judah whose mothers are not listed are the wicked Joram (Jehoram) and Ahaz. Not only were these kings particularly godless, but also the book of Kings summarizes their reigns in exactly the same way – that they: “walked in the way of the kings of Israel” (2 Kings 8:18; 16:3 and see Note 5). In other words, we are not told of the mothers of the only two kings of Judah who completely disqualified themselves from rule because they acted like kings of Israel, just as we are not told of the mothers of all the wicked kings of Israel itself. This fact indicates that the royal mothers were viewed as a vital *symbolic* as well as biological part of the Davidic dynastic line – a perspective that begins with the promise of Eve’s “seed” (Genesis 3:15), continues throughout the stories of the kings, and eventually surfaces in the genealogy of Jesus that is recorded through his mother Mary (Luke 3:23-38 – see Note 6).

For the most part, the history of the kings of both Judah and Israel was a litany of unwise, disobedient, and corrupt kings, but their stories show the two sides of God’s nature in working through these individuals: his justice and his grace. God’s justice is seen in that he repeatedly warned the kings of punishment if they did not repent and eventually brought destruction on them and the people who followed their example, as we will see in the next units of this course.

But God’s grace is also seen in the fact that a number of kings – even some of the not-so-good ones – were ancestors of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:9), the fact that God forgave them when they turned from their mistakes, and the fact that the stories of the very best kings of Judah provided glimpses of what the reign of the promised messianic King would be like. Although these human kings all failed to measure up to that goal, the mention of the king’s mother at the beginning of the story of every Judean king except the very worst reminds us that the potential was there and would continue until the promised seed finally came.

Ultimately, just as the book of Judges shows repeatedly that the people of Israel needed a king to guide and rule them, the books of Kings and Chronicles show repeatedly that it could not be just any king – that a perfect King was needed to fulfill the perfect promises made to David.

* Note 1: Archaeological excavations at Dan have discovered the high place constructed by Jeroboam for the golden calf erected there. The sanctuary complex included a large altar in an open-air courtyard.

* Note 2: The Egyptian records of Shoshenq's invasion include a stela found at Megiddo in Israel as well as celebratory texts on the Bubastite Portal at Karnak in Upper Egypt, and reliefs on the walls of a small temple of Amun at el-Hibeh in central Egypt.

*Note 3: The northern tribes of Israel had two short-lived capitals at Shechem and Tirzah, but then established a capital at Samaria, where it remained for the duration of the northern kingdom's existence.

* Note 4: Most of Judah's and Israel's kings had "theophoric" names – names containing a reference to God – so the many kings whose names began with "Ja," or "Jo" or ended with "iah" all reflected the name Yah or Yahweh – for example, Abijah ("Yah is my father"). However, only a very few of those kings attempted to honor that name.

* Note 5: In the same way, following in the path of David and not in that of the kings of Israel is the Bible's assessment of Jehoshaphat: "The LORD was with Jehoshaphat because he followed the example of his father David's earlier days and ... sought the God of his father, followed His commandments, and did not act as Israel did" (2 Chronicles 17:3-4).

* Note 6: The genealogy given in Luke 3 ends with Jesus' nominal human father, Joseph, but is actually the genealogy of Mary. This is because, with no brothers, Mary's inheritance right of kingship would legally pass to her husband, and Joseph's father-in-law Heli would be counted as his "father." There was no specific word in New Testament Greek for "father-in-law."

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

1. What three tactics did Jeroboam utilize to attempt to stop the people of the northern tribes returning to Judah?
2. What is the biblical significance of the so-called "Black Obelisk" of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III?
3. Why does the Bible not list the mothers of two of Judah's kings?

Looking Below the Surface:

Think of some specific examples of how the best kings of Judah provided glimpses of what the reign of the promised messianic King would be like.

Everyday Applications:

Think of some practical ways we can apply the lesson of Jehoshaphat – of the mistake of closely aligning ourselves with those who are wrongful influences while seeking God in our own lives.

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