

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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JANUARY 20, 2008



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1 Kings 11:1-13

"Torn"

You could entitle this sermon series "*Whatever happened to Israel?*" It's a question that matters because it affects all of history to this day. We are looking at the period of about 350 years from about 930 BC to 580 BC – from the death of Solomon to the start of the Babylonian Exile. If you ask why this period matters, think where it stands in the major events of Israel's life: Abraham's arrival in the land around 1800 BC, the Israelites going to Egypt and then returning after the Exodus, the conquest of Canaan, the emergence of the monarchy around 1000 BC. Three major kings rule over the people of Israel: Saul, David and Solomon, and in this period Israel changes from a loose federation of tribes to a nation whose boundaries stretch from Damascus to the Sinai peninsula, from the Mediterranean to hundreds of miles east of the Jordan valley.

But from the death of Solomon, everything goes downhill fast. Israel divides into northern and southern kingdoms, and in a little over 200 years the northern kingdom disappears, overrun and then repopulated by the Assyrians. So begins the *Diaspora*, the *Dispersion of the Jews*, and they are soon scattered over every corner of the Middle East as far as the borders of India, into North Africa, through Asia Minor, up past the Black Sea into Asia proper, and along the Mediterranean into Greece and Italy and southern Gaul. The consequences for European and Asian history are still with us.

And when the southern kingdom finally falls to the Babylonians in 586 BC, Israel as a nation and as a state disappears for 2500 years. When after WW II the "Allied Powers" agree to assist in re-establishing the modern state of Israel in 1948, an ongoing war begins with the occupants of Palestine; one that is not over yet by a long way!

1) *Three Foolish Men*

What set these events into motion? The actions of three foolish men. One was Solomon the king, the second his reckless son and successor Rehoboam, and the third, Solomon's ambitious administrator Jeroboam.

Solomon was renowned for his wisdom, for his great building projects (including the Temple in Jerusalem and the royal palaces), for extending the kingdom and bringing peace, and for his great wealth. But in his old age or perhaps earlier, his wisdom left him. He began to indulge himself in his wealth and his wives. The Scripture says he had 700 wives and 300 concubines – and whether those are symbolic numbers or real ones, Solomon had clearly lost his mind! The wives were all non-Israelites, and we assume that many of these marriages were politically motivated – as his first marriage to the daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt had been. The 300 concubines were, we imagine, more

to do with demonstrating his power as a man, even as he aged.

But the worst of it was that “his heart” was turned towards his wives and their wishes, and in particular to their different religions. So before long Solomon builds shrines and temples to all the pagan gods of the surrounding nations – to Ashtoreth, to Chemosh, to Molech – and he “held fast to them,” and he was no longer “fully devoted to the LORD his God.” Perhaps at first he was just being kind to his wives, but he was torn between them and his God. Now you may think this is trivial, even benign, just a recognition of the cultures and traditions of his wives – the sort of thing a rich and worldly-wise man would do for them.

But we need to realize just what he was getting his people into. Ashtoreth is the Hebrew name for Astarte, the Phoenician goddess of love and war. She was revered by most Mediterranean and Mid-Eastern cultures: they called her Ishtar in Babylonia; the Greeks would call her Aphrodite, the Romans, Venus. She was the head of the all-too-familiar ancient cult of fertility. As the goddess of motherhood and sexual love, prostitution “in the name of Astarte” was widespread and often a feature of worship at her shrines.

Now even if you think promiscuous sex is not that big a deal, maybe you think less well of child sacrifice. The god Molech (or Moloch or Malik or Milcom) had been a major god of the area we now call Jordan for a long time – even back in the days of Moses the Israelites had been explicitly forbidden to have anything to do with his cult. *Leviticus* made it a capital offense to worship Molech. Why? Because it involved sacrifice of children by fire. It was widespread from Canaan to Carthage in North Africa (where it was still going on in the 1st century AD!). But to please his wives, Solomon built Molech a

“high place on a hill east of Jerusalem” – that is, on the Mount of Olives!

This is the folly of Solomon – a divided heart, divided loyalties, *torn* between what he knows and what he wants; and so he suffers the anger of the LORD his God. The LORD will raise up adversaries against Israel – the Edomites, the Syrians – and Solomon’s kingdom will be divided; indeed *torn apart*, says the LORD. But out of respect for his father David, the king “after God’s own heart” to whom the LORD had promised an unending dynasty, the LORD says the division of the kingdom will not occur until Solomon’s death.

Who knew of this prophecy from the LORD? Anyone but Solomon? We don’t know. Nor do we hear, until Solomon dies, anything about his son Rehoboam who succeeds him. (We imagine there might have been many more sons of Solomon, given the number of his wives and concubines, but we are told nothing of them, and there is apparently no dispute over the succession). But we quickly learn that Rehoboam is a fool of a different kind. He is much taken with his power; and he wants above all to “appear tough.”

Solomon’s great building projects had been carried on the backs of conscripted labor and heavy taxation. Ordinary people resented the forced and harsh labor, and when Rehoboam is made king, a delegation headed by the administrator Jeroboam appears before him. “Your father was harsh to us; we ask you to lighten the load on your people.” The new king spends three days in consultation with his elders, and then with his younger friends. His response is perhaps the worst decision ever made by a king of Israel; it sets in motion the process by which the kingdom will be destroyed. Solomon is the *cause* of the disaster, but Rehoboam through his own brand of stupidity pulls the levers that *make it happen*. His answer to the delegation is “if

you thought my father was harsh, just wait until you see what I will do to you!" The commentators tells us his reply is actually couched in a euphemistic vulgarism - "his finger is thicker than his father's waist" - which is not exactly what the Hebrew says, but you get the drift, I am sure. Rehoboam is "the man" and he wants everyone to know it. He is the tough guy, the Rambo of the moment.

The result is entirely predictable. The people revolt and choose Jeroboam as their king. There was reason to choose him - he had already caused trouble when Solomon was alive, and had fled to Egypt for a while. What is more, a prophet named Adonijah had come to him, torn his cloak in twelve pieces and given Jeroboam ten of them. "The LORD will make you king over ten tribes," said the prophet. And so it happens - Jeroboam sets up a capital in Shechem over the ten northern tribes, and takes the name Israel for his kingdom. Solomon's son Rehoboam is left with only the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin in the south, although he retains control of Jerusalem and the Temple. The nation is divided; *Israel* in the north, and what becomes known as the nation of *Judah* - and much later the province of Judea - in the south.

Jeroboam wastes no time in establishing control in the north. Knowing that Israelites who still follow the LORD will want to worship at the Temple, he builds alternative shrines for them in Bethel and Dan; and in them he places golden calves! "Here are your gods, O Israel," he says - sounding just like Aaron at the foot of Mt. Sinai. He appoints new priests, new festivals, and himself offers sacrifices. Indeed his actions become legendary: for generations after, every king of the northern kingdom will be measured by whether he repeats "the sin of Jeroboam" in setting up an alternative faith for Israel...

Three fools: Solomon, whose wisdom isn't enough to keep him from over-indulging himself; Rehoboam who wants to be seen as tough, and Jeroboam who uses religion for political purposes. The result - in the providence of the LORD - is that the nation is divided. It is the beginning of the end for Israel; and all the prophets in the next 300 years will in effect announce the demise of Israel, and point the people towards a hope that lies beyond Exile and Dispersion, to a sovereign God who brings life from death. If you sense here even a prefiguring of the New Testament Gospel, you will not be wrong.

2) *Torn But Used*

So much for history. What is God up to? What does he tell us through stories like this?

That just three foolish men can in a few months change the course of history for three thousand years. That bad leaders can cause great harm, in communities, in churches, in nations. That wisdom and compassion and loyalty are more important than indulging appetites or appearing tough or grabbing opportunities for self-advancement. That in very strange ways that we cannot yet fully grasp, God's methods are so often those of suffering, sacrifice, and defeat; with promises of new life beyond all that - but life only by his grace and not by human calculation or effort.

That having your heart divided; torn between loyalty to God and other more immediately entertaining things, can set in motion consequences far beyond our reckoning. That it takes the grace of God to restrain and redirect and use for good the actions of foolish leaders. That even when very bad things happen to peoples and communities and nations, it is sometimes for reasons that we cannot hope to discern, but

are part of a movement by God that will have huge consequences.

After the Fall in the garden of Eden, and the rapid degradation of human life until the flood, and the realization that even Noah's family was no great solution, God called Abraham to become the source of "a chosen people" through whom he would set his world to rights again. But the chosen people turned out to be as much part of the problem as its solution, and they quickly forgot their calling to show to the world what a reconciled, godly and holy people would look like. So as Israel declines, God moves to focus all his plans for blessing the world into one man, into one "true Israelite" who worships and trusts the LORD his God, who obeys Torah, who personifies wisdom. *The Servant of the LORD*, Isaiah calls him, but a *Suffering Servant* - someone who, like Israel, will have to suffer, sacrifice, die, in order for God's reconciling and recreating work to be brought to life through him. Israel will have to die so that new life can come to the world; the servant will die so that the world can live.

And then "his people," the followers of the Servant, the "new Israel," it will be commissioned to go out and spread the news of God's reconciling and recreating work by word and deed to the whole world. They will have to re-learn and re-demonstrate all the old lessons, about wisdom and restraint and compassion and loyalty; and have to do so in a world where such things, once called "virtues," are rarely modeled by leaders, and frequently despised by the powerful.

But that is their calling, as it was their Lord's; to show they have been touched by the grace and mercy of a good and loving and redeeming God; who gave everything for them and to reflect that grace into their relationships and their leadership. Lord,

preserve us from human follies, and make us instruments of reconciliation!

Let us pray...