

November 27, 2005

Prophet

Moving from the dominance of kings over the people of Israel to the rise of the office of prophet we need to take a brief look at the history the Jewish people following Solomon's reign, which marked the summit of Israel's power.

Solomon was given the rule of the kingdom with one stipulation, that Solomon would continue to worship the Lord as his father David had done. Then we read: *"For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods and his heart was not as true to the Lord his God as was the heart of David his father."* This angered the Lord and he said to Solomon:

"Since this has been your mind and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant ... However I will not tear away all of the kingdom; but I will give one side to your son, for the sake of David, my servant."

After David's death it did not take long for trouble to assert

itself in the Northern Kingdom. During Solomon's late years resentment mounted over taxes and forced labor. Added to this was the eagerness with which Solomon had cultivated pagan ways.

During the reign of Solomon's son, Rehoboan, the Northern Tribes declared their independence along with the name "Israel." This left Rehoboan as ruler over a much smaller kingdom, the Southern Kingdom, the Kingdom of Judah. Judah was composed of the tribal lands of Judah and part of the land of Egypt.

Here was a dividing line in the history of the Jewish people. When we read about Israel we are reading about the Northern Tribes. When we read about Judah we are reading about the tribe of Judah in the Southern Kingdom.

The Northern Kingdom started out as a volatile kingdom to say the least. With so many tribes it was hard to get a consensus as to where they wanted the kingdom to go much less how to get there. During the 200 years of its existence Israel was ruled by

19 kings, eight of which died violently.

One problem for the Northern Kingdom was the lack of an established national religion. To many the city of Jerusalem and the Temple was the source of their faith. Now both were an integral part of the Kingdom of Judah.

In 876 B.C. the line of David as ruler of the Northern Kingdom was cut off. Omar, an army officer, seized control of the Northern throne. His son Ahad followed Omar's seven year reign. Ahad moved the Northern Kingdom further away from the dynasty promised to David.

Ahad married a Phoenician princess, Jezebel. Jezebel came to the northern capital of Samaria with a group of priest who worshiped Baal along with a group of minor Phoenician gods. Jezebel and these priests attempted to make Baal worship the kingdom's principal religion. The royal court in Samaria was taken over by Phoenician ways.

To meet the assault on the Jewish religion came the prophet Elijah. Unlike a king a prophet was not the product of

birth. Unlike an ambassador or a general a prophet was not the product of royal appointment. A prophet was sustained by his own conviction that the Lord had chosen him as a spokesman and a direct emissary to the king and the people of Israel. The prophet's right to speak was considered sacred.

Elijah was a wild looking fellow, dressed in a leather loin cloth with a cloak of woven hair. Elijah would appear without warning to challenge Israel's rulers and their pagan gods. Then he would just disappear only to reappear to carry on the struggle at a later date. We remember Elijah as the prophet who rode to Heaven in a chariot of fire.

In 745 B.C. Jordan, Israel and other countries in the area were overrun by Assyria. In 724 B.C. Israel attempted to gain independence. The Assyrians crushed the rebellion sending 27,290 people to various parts of the Assyrian empire. In turn Israel was resettled with Assyrian captives from other territories. Foreigners and Israelites intermarried creating a new people mingling their respective cultures and religious traditions.

These people later appeared in Jewish history as Samaritans. For all intents and purposes the invasion of 724 brought an end to Israel as a Jewish kingdom.

This left Judah the Southern Kingdom. Judah had been spared Israel's fate. During the period of 715-687 B.C. Judah was ruled by King Hezekiah, a leader second only to King David.

Enter the great prophet Isaiah who involved himself both in the political as well as the religious affairs of Judah. In 713 B.C. Hezekiah was urged to join in the uprising against Assyria. Isaiah was against this involvement prophesying that in God's own good time he would make it known when Assyria would fall so that Judah could assert its independence. Following Isaiah's advice Judah was spared defeat for the moment.

But a few years later Judah joined Egypt in a bid for independence. Judah was overrun but following Israel's advice Judah made peace to salvage what was left of the Kingdom.

This peace didn't last long. A dozen years later, Assyria

attacked Jerusalem. This time Isaiah urged Hezekiah to resist. He did. And within a short time pestilence descended on the Assyrian camp killing thousand and lifting the siege on Jerusalem.

King Manasseh followed Hezekiah. Bad choice. Under Manasseh paganism returned to Judah. Manasseh permitted fertility rites and cultic prostitution, even in the Temple.

Back over in an area we know as Iran and Iraq Babylon reemerged as a world power. King Josiah followed Manasseh and took on a program of destroying pagan shrines and executing pagan priests. Enter the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah said that Josiah's program was not enough. He opposed the growing self-satisfaction among the people of Judah that they were fulfilling their spiritual obligations when they were in fact turning their backs on the Lord.

By 600 B.C. Babylon had control of all of Palestine. Jerusalem rebelled. Nebuchadnezzar laid siege and over ran Jerusalem. Some thousands of Jerusalem's important citizens

were taken into exile. According to Babylonian records this took place March 16, 597 B.C.

Some of the remaining nobles were not prepared to give up. They attempted to fight back. That was a disaster. A few hundred people were led away in chains, Jerusalem was plundered and burned.

After many years a few Jews would return, "*The remnant of Israel.*" but the kingdom of Judah was gone. The course of Jewish history had been altered forever.

This capsule of the history of the Jewish people after Solomon is to introduce us to a study of the prophets. We won't try to look at more than a few. Right now Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah come to mind.

Now the lesson from all of this. Hugh Comer used to open his Sunday School lesson with a verse from Psalm 127:

"Except the Lord build a house, they labor in vain that built it; except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain."

This kind of sums up what the prophets were telling the

rulers of Judah. I submit that this is good advice to all people at all times and especially our country today.

The strength of security of individual men and nations is in God and in the morality of the Judeo-Christian traditions. We can be materially prosperous beyond the world's wildest dreams but unless our foundations are laid in God, unless God keeps the house, it will not stand.

This nation was settled and its governmental institutions founded upon and its traditions developed within the Christian tradition. Our founded fathers insited a very important vision in our constitution, "*The congress should make no laws effecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*" For years we understood this provision to mean that our government would not establish a state religion. During this period we read the Bible at school, opened our meetings and public events with a prayer, called on God in time of national disaster, and combined God with trust on our money. God was a part of our national life.

Forty or so years ago a professed atheist in Maryland brought a suit objecting to her children being subjected to compulsory Bible reading and the recitation of the Lord's prayer. The ruling in that case is a triumph for unchristian, non-Christian, anti-Christian, atheistic elements in our national life. The ruling opened the way for and encourages further efforts to remove the last vestiges of the influence of Christian tradition in our national life.

I am reminded of some of the wall decorations in Egypt when one ruler replaced another he had the face of his predecessor chiseled from the public display and in so doing disfigured the story of events in the national life of Egypt. Even now we are mindful that "*Christmas*" had become "*Holiday*" and the godless ones seek to erase God from our money.

We desperately need to hear the message from these prophets we are going to study.

Pastor's Message

It has been truthfully said that the penalty for ignorance of history is to have to repeat it. While the author of this saying was speaking of political history, the principle applies to the living of everyday life.

The individual who makes no investigations as to what courses of action make for inward peace and outward success is almost universally doomed to mediocrity and failure and for the most part to personal misery.

Even the most casual and superficial study of the course of human lives both in the past and in the present demonstrates the superiority of virtuous conduct over evil ways and the excellence of following wisdom over the persistence in folly. The virtues of integrity, truthfulness, faithfulness, generosity and so on do pay the dividends and produce the rewards of inward peace and if practically applied, of outward success in human life.

The greatest service of an intelligent religion is to hold up to a man those courses of action which will produce the fullest human life possible and to warn him of those ways of living that in the long run lead to misery and disaster.

The individual human life span is too short for each man to experiment with ways of living for himself. The wise man avails himself of the experiences of mankind as recorded in the lives of those who have lived in the past and follow the guide lines of intelligent and practical religion.

PRAYER

O God, give me the wisdom and the good sense to acquaint myself with the evidence which human experience in the past reveals as to what is good and evil in living; and above all may I heed the counsels of intelligent religion. Amen.