

Ancient Israel: The Divided Kingdom

The birth process of Israel as God's people began with the call of Abram (Gen 12:1-3), the deliverance from the bondage of Egypt (Exod 3:ff), the covenant at Sinai (Exod 19:5-6), and culminated with the entrance in the Promised Land (Josh 1:1-4; 24:1-31). Out of all the nations of the earth Israel was meant to be God's treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation (Exod 19:5-6). A triple bond should hold strongly the individuals together: one blood, one God, and one land. The Israelites lost sight of the purpose of their election. They rejected God as their king and asked for a human king to lead them like all the nations (1 Sam 8:5-7; 9:1-1 Kgs 11).

Beginning with Roboam, Solomon's son and successor, God's one nation was divided into two rival kingdoms: Judah in the south and Israel in the north, and remained so for more than two hundred years. Nineteen kings succeeded over the throne of Israel until its fall in 722 B.C. Sin caused the division and the division increased sin. Jeroboam, the first king of Israel, made two golden calves, built shrines, appointed priests, and instituted his own religious service calendar. He even offered sacrifices, a function that belonged to the priests alone (1 Kgs 12:33). His motivation

proceeds from political calculation and from distrust in God and in the people he is ruling. He wanted to avoid that the kingdom reverts to David's house, that the people give again their allegiance to David's successors (1 Kgs 12:26-33).

God sent a prophet to Bethel to pronounce a judgment against Jeroboam's idolatry and to lead him to repentance, but this was for no avail (1 Kgs 13:1-10). Coup d'etat, assassination, and machinations became the normal way of getting to power and of maintaining it. A dense spiritual darkness submerges the land. The people of God has rejected God's covenant, broken down his altars. The air rang with the shouts of a multitude of false prophets while God's prophets were reduced to silence, put to death with the sword (1 Kgs 1:10). All the high places of the Holy Land were covered and polluted with the smoke of idolatrous incenses and sacrifices (1 Kgs 11:4-9). Prophets were deceiving prophets (1 Kgs 13:11-33). In spite of this spiritual disaster, God was never left without witnesses, without men and women who stand before him to listen and execute his will (1 Kgs 17:1; 2 Kgs 3:14). Besides the many prophets who exercised their public ministry at this difficult time,¹ the Bible mentions men and women of faith

¹Some of these prophets are Elijah, Elisha, Micaiah, Obadiah, Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah.

who shined like stars in the darkness (1 Kgs 17:9-24; 18:7-16, 2 Kgs 4:1, 8-37). They stand as the remnant of God's people, as a vivid expression of God's grace, faithfulness, and judgement (1 Kgs 19:18).

The exhausting taxation and forced labor to build and maintain the temple and the royal palace and the arrogance of Solomon's son Roboam are the immediate causes of the division of God's one people. Its deep, real cause, however, was God's judgement against Israel's sin. The book of Kings forcefully presents the division and decline Israel as coming from God, as a punishment of the detestable, abominable, and crude ungodliness that provoked God's anger in the Holy Land (1 Kgs 11:1-3, 9-10, 11-42). Sin led to the downfall and destruction of Jeroboam's house (1 Kgs 13:34), and to the decline of the whole kingdom. The Lord used Assyria as his agent of judgement against the kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. (Isa 10:5).

The apostle Paul laconically presents the significance of the Exodus event for the church in these words: "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come" (1 Cor 10:11). This same purpose fits the period of the divided kingdom. What do we learn from

the things written about the divided kingdom for our warning and instruction?

The events of the divided kingdom period reveal a God who is holy, loving, patient, jealous, and just. Because of his holiness and jealousy God cannot tolerate sin or share his glory with other gods (Exod 20:5; 34:14; Isa 42:8), but because of his love and patience he gives time and opportunities to the sinners to repent (Rom 2:4). All the happenings of the period get significance in the light of these divine attributes. What happened to Israel warns us that the exclusion of God from the political arena and the tolerance of sin are pregnant with serious, fatal consequences: anarchy, chaos, and decline. Surprisingly enough, in many churches and for many Christian, God is becoming peripheral and sin is losing its gravity. Jesus, the builder and source of life of the church, is standing at the door of many churches and knocking (Rev 3:20). The same cause producing the same effect, sin and the marginalization of God resulted in the weakening, downfall, and decline of Israel (1 Kgs 13:34), they will produce the same effect in the church. However, as in Israel God preserved a remnant, likewise "the gates of hell will not prevail against the church" (Matt 16:18). Is God at the center or on the brink of the life of your church?

The history of the divided kingdom communicates the pertinent lesson that individual sin may have corporate implications. The leader's sin affects the whole community (1 Kgs 14:16). Because we live in a morally decaying society, a society that praises open-mindedness and condonation of all kinds of evil, are not we becoming more sensitive to these requirements than to our role of salt and light of the world? God's judgement over and punishment of sin begins here and now. Because of the dullness of our spiritual discernment, are not we unable to see them?

The account of the events of the divided kingdom is a call to maintain the unity of the new people of God, the church. This must be done by putting God again at the center of our individual and corporate life and by pursuing sanctification without which no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14). We are not allowed to lower God's standard.