

# Heights and Fissures

- rise of monarchy to the division of the kingdom

## WEAKNESS AND STRENGTH

### Canaanites

Throughout the whole Old Testament period, the great threat to Israel's existence from within was the worship of other gods, esp. the Canaanite gods Baal and Asherah. This religion, a fertility-cult, forms the background of many prophetic words in the Old Testament, for instance of the Book of Hosea (see Hos 2:5-8; Deut 26:1-9).

Texts taken from the period (Ugarit) have shown that Israel certainly deserved the denunciations of them by the prophets. Indeed the Hebrew Scriptures reveal how far compromise had occurred in that children were often given Canaanite names. One of the sons of Saul was Ish-Baal ('Man of Baal') and many Israelite towns carried names such as Baal or Anat.

The reasons for this may have been to do with the success the Canaanites had in agriculture, which they claimed was due to their religion. It is not surprising that the Israelites were tempted to adopt Canaanite ways of belief and worship.

There were significant differences between the worship of Baal and the worship of Yahweh:

- Yahweh, was not simply a god of nature only to be seen in the yearly cycles of summer and winter
- Yahweh was a personal God
- Yahweh's actions came from love and care for his people
- The worship of Baal centred around magical rituals, designed to bully the gods into making the earth fertile
- The Canaanite view was that religion had nothing to do with behaviour in normal life
- Yahweh most concerned the way people lived their lives not ritual (Mic 6:8) 'to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God'

### Mesopotamia

The region 'Between the Rivers', known as Mesopotamia, waxed and waned in power of the years. From the time of King Hammurabi (about 1790-1750 BC, the city of Babylon on the River Euphrates (in southern Iraq) grew in prominence.

Generally the cities of Mesopotamia (Babylon) were centres of great learning, with much writing emanating from the scholars across all disciplines from divination to medicine and astrology to mathematics.

Evidence from the Egyptian excavations in Amarna show that there was correspondence between the Babylonian kings and the Egyptians; but the relationship between Babylonia and her northern neighbour, Assyria was uneasy owing to the concerns over military expansion.



## Monarchy

Saul's reign lasted between 10 and 20 years and united the tribes north of Gilead, Israel and Judah. Nonetheless large parts of Palestine remained outside Saul's control, specifically:

- Philistia
- Canaanite enclaves in northern plains and valleys
- Transjordan

David's reign lasted longer and he ruled from the Negev in the south to the Euphrates in the north.

Under the united Monarchy there was growth of the cities and a renewal of interest in urbanisation

There were special ties between David and Solomon's kingdoms and the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon as the Israelites lacked sea-going knowledge and thus Phoenicia became important for trade.

The Negev highland region served as a link between the heartland of Judah and the arid regions of southern Negev, which was the southern limit of Judah.

Israel was an example of the many small kingdoms during this period who were no longer under the control of the great empires of the Hittites or the Egyptians, which says more about the strength of the ancient empires than anything else.

Another major change during this period was the growing importance of the sea-people who had begun to migrate from the Aegean in the realm of the Mycenaean civilization. One of these groups who had landed in the coastal regions and populated the area were the Philistines.

The Philistines established 3 coastal cities states – Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon later Gath and Kron → five cities of the Philistine plain – Pentapolis. Their main aim was to control overland trade routes by establishing military posts and therefore Philistines become major enemies of the Israelites.

## FROM SHOPHET TO MELEK

### Saul – charismatic king

#### □ From *nagid* to *melek*

While Saul may have risen to kingship out of Israel's desire to imitate her pagan neighbours, her monarchy was always unique. Saul began his reign very much in the mould of the earlier charismatic judges. He is initially called *nagid* (prince or leader); only once he had proved himself is he called *melek* (king), establishing his authority as permanent (cf. 1Sam 10:1 with 11:14).

His early acts justify the confidence placed in him. The whole of his reign is in fact spent in war, with the Philistines continuing to be the major enemy. However, he also attacked the Amalekites who pursued him from trans-Jordan.



## □ Modest beginnings

Saul has been called a 'rustic chieftain'. He made no changes to the internal structure of Israel with its tribal organisation. He had no harem – an essential mark of oriental kingship – and no splendid court or bureaucracy, as later kings will have. Archaeology suggests his fortress in Gibeah to have been no more than a large farmhouse. So kingship in Israel has very modest beginnings.

## □ Insane jealousy

Emotional instability was Saul's undoing. Medically he was clearly 'paranoid schizophrenic'. While it must always have been a possible weakness in his make-up, his disobedience over sacrifice, his rejection by God and his jealousy over David together triggered his mental and emotional collapse. The Spirit of God that initially inspired him was later replaced by a spirit of torment (1 Sam 16:14-15); by the end of his life he was no longer quite sane.

His final years see Saul so obsessed with catching David that his war with the Philistines lapses. They await their chance for a knockout blow. It comes. At Aphek once again, they assemble their forces with chariots. Saul, though he has the relative security of Mount Gilboa, throws away the advantage by insanely rushing at them to his death. Tragically, the one thing Saul did not lack was courage.

## David – character of kingship

### □ Unique person

The spotlight now falls on David, a person with a unique place in the Hebrew history; someone who is described as having a character after God's own heart (1Sam 13:14). He is the great ancestor and forerunner of Jesus 'the Messiah', the one who fulfilled the promise that one of David's house would rule forever (2Sam 7:13-16). David is mentioned 58 times in the New Testament, frequently as part of the title 'son of David' given to Jesus.

While the Hebrew Bible looks forward to an ideal ruler who will be another David, it does not try to gloss over the sins and character defects of the 'son of Jesse', but he always turns from his failure, murder and adultery, with genuine repentance (cf. Ps 51).

David is a character with many sides – an activist, poet, musician, lover, generous foe, stern judge, loyal friend, fearless warrior, brilliant ruler, wholesome and admirable – someone who for all his greatness could be directed by God. It has been said, 'It is no exaggeration if we describe David as a political and military genius.' He led Israel to undreamt-of greatness. It is easy to see why he prophetically prefigures the 'king of kings'.

### □ Anointed person

We are introduced to David in the solitude of the shepherd. He is plucked from obscurity by the word of knowledge via Samuel. He becomes the personal minstrel to the king (1Sam 16:14-23) and then becomes a national hero by killing the Philistine champion Goliath (1Sam 17:1–18:8). David won fame, position, the undying love of Jonathan, and a marriage to the king's daughter.

David is described in glowing terms: 'Behold, I have seen the son of Jesse ... who is skilful in playing the lyre, a man of valour, a man of war, prudent in speech, a person of good



presence, and the Lord is with him' (1Sam 16:18). And '... who among your servants is as faithful as David, who is the king's son-in-law, captain over your body guard, honoured in your house?' (1Sam 22:14).

#### □ **The outlaw**

As David's popularity began to eclipse Saul's, the king could endure it no longer. David was forced to flee to the Judean hills, which he had known from his youth, to live the life of an outlaw. The remarkable nature of his character is seen in the way he drew to himself all the malcontents of Israelite society, '... everyone who was in distress ... who was in debt ... who was discontent, gathered to him, and he became captain over them' (1Sam 22:2).

Out of this mixture of misfits and desperadoes emerged a fighting force of 400 warriors, and David began the precarious existence of a *khapiru* (lit. 'bandit-chief'). He would play both ends against the middle, attacking the Philistines if the chance afforded it, and spending the rest of the time evading Saul's attempts to ensnare him. He also lived by offering 'protection' to the flocks of wealthy citizens that could afford it (1Sam 25:7-8; 15-16).

#### □ **The mercenary**

Soon it was impossible for David to remain in Israel. The population began to find him a nuisance, either because they supported Saul or because they feared reprisals from the king for helping David (cf. 1Sam 22:6-19).

To free himself from the dilemma, he offered his services (now a 600-strong army) to Achish, the Philistine king of Gath (1Sam 27:1-4). David was given Ziklag, in the Judean foothills, as a headquarters; the Philistines hoped of course that he would harass Israel. But David was no traitor. He played sly games; attacking the Amalekites but telling the Philistines it was Israel, and distributing the plunder among the grateful townsfolk of the Judean hillside, winning their support also.

It was at this time that Saul was attacked by the Philistines at Aphek. Fearing that David would turn traitor to them, the Philistines forced him to stay in Ziklag (1Sam 29:1-11). What David would have done if he had been forced to fight against Saul we shall never know.

#### □ **Ruling in Judah**

Saul is dead. His family is dead or scattered. His fourth son Eshbaal (Ishbosheth – lit. 'man of shame') fled to trans-Jordan with Abner as his support, and was crowned king. The propaganda of his 'refugee government' made the dubious claim that he ruled 'all Israel' (cf. 2Sam 2:8-11).

The Philistines allowed David to rule in Judah; he was still in treaty with them. He was crowned in Hebron with popular acclaim (2Sam 2:4). While David was not totally unlike the 'judges' of the previous generation, he was unique in being a victorious and seasoned soldier with a large personal army. He is acclaimed king without reference to the other tribes! From now on the names 'Judah' and 'Israel' assume a distinct and special sense.

David and Eshbaal co-exist for two years. We see David making no effort to remove him. While a sordid series of events, in which David plays no part, lead to Eshbaal's murder, it

is important to note that David always trusts God to give him the throne; whether facing Eshbaal or Saul, he will not take it by force.

#### □ **King over all Israel**

With Eshbaal dead, the tribes of Israel flock to David, crowning him king at Hebron (2Sam 5:3). Having favour in the eyes of God and the people, a whole new kingdom order is emerging. We see a divided geographical area: Judah – south, Israel –north, united in the person of David. The union is fragile and David acts carefully not to fracture it. But history will show that the feelings beneath the surface never healed, and within two generations the kingdom will split into two.

With David king over the whole Hebrew nation the death-knell sounds for the Philistines. In a few years their cities are firmly under his rule.

### **JERUSALEM: 'PLACE OF PEACE'**

#### **Jerusalem is taken from the Jebusites**

David's most significant step is capturing the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was originally a joint Hittite and Amorite foundation and its inhabitants called themselves Jebusites. Only part of Jerusalem fell to Judah at the conquest (Judges 1:8) and the fortress had never been taken (Joshua 15:63; Judges 1:21). David realises that Jerusalem is strategically important, lying between the two constituent parts of his kingdom, Israel and Judah. Free from external danger, David gives full attention to strengthening the internal structures of the kingdom. If he is to unite Israel and Judah in one realm he will need to remove this Jebusite state existing between the two areas. But this would be no easy task. Jerusalem was strongly fortified and the Jebusites were confident that their citadel on the hill Ophel was impregnable. So confident were the Jebusites that they taunted David and his army by saying that the blind and lame would be able to keep them out. David was not disheartened and announced that whoever succeeded in capturing the fortress would be made commander-in-chief of his forces. David's cousin, Joab, took up this challenge and successfully led David's troops into the city by an unexpected route – the water shaft by which water was drawn up from the cave forty feet below into which the Gihon spring empties. This attack shocked the Jebusites who never imagined that their city could be invaded in such a way. David sets about making the city his own, free from links with either Israel or Judah. In the seventh year of David's reign we have unity, at a neutral hub, endowed with the significance of David's personality, 'the city of David'.

#### **Political and religious significance**

Jerusalem had enormous political and religious significance. Politically Jerusalem now served as the base from which David dominated the land. He subjugated the Philistines and made them his vassals. Being a newly conquered area and remaining a city-state in its own right meant that neither Israel nor Judah could complain that the other was favoured. (Only after the division of the kingdom following Solomon's reign did Jerusalem become the capital of Judah only).

Jerusalem was a sacred city for both Canaanites and Israelites. Had not Melchizedek been the ancient Canaanite priest-king of Jerusalem? (cf. Gen. 14: 17-20) Now David sits on his sacred throne assuming the privileges of a priest while ruling as a king (cf. Ps. 110).



David set about making Jerusalem the spiritual centre of the united nation as well as the political and military capital. He knew that the heart of the nation was the covenant; and so at the earliest possible moment he brought the Ark into Jerusalem. It had lain neglected in Kiriath-jearim almost since Shiloh had fallen to the Philistines. Concerned that Israel and Judah should have one inter-tribal sanctuary, the Ark was placed in a tent (not the Tabernacle) and linked with the priestly ministries of Abiathar and Zadok. Here in Jerusalem was a dwelling place for Yahweh, the God of Israel. A whole new thing is happening! Here is a new religious and political centre for the focus of the nation. Here were born the psalms that are the treasures of Jewish/ Christian worship.

## **KINGDOM OF DAVID AND SOLOMON**

### **David and empire**

Having overrun the Philistines, David subjugated any remaining Canaanite states. He then expanded his empire into Ammon, Moab and Edom, each falling in turn. Syria also fell and was administered from a garrison in Damascus.

These conquests transformed Israel into one of the strongest kingdoms of her day. It reached from the Mediterranean Sea to the Arabian Desert, from deep to the south in Sinai at Aqabah, to the north into the Lebanon range. The centre of this huge empire was the person of David himself.

We can only guess at how the empire was administered, but we can assume David actively led this himself. His court was larger than Saul's but modest in comparison with Solomon's. He had a large 'harem' and a hand-picked bodyguard of 30 soldiers.

### **Succession question**

The problem of 'throne succession' plagues the last days of David's reign. Only an heir could hold David's empire together after his death, but who was it to be? The king did nothing to resolve the problem, and his spoilt sons plotted and planned.

No ruler in Israelite history had yet had a descendant to succeed them. Charismatic leadership was all the people knew. Could the Hebrew kingdom make the transition to dynastic rule?

- **Absalom's rebellion** was fuelled by personal and social bitterness, and shows how volatile the situation was. Absalom probably had little real chance of success. Though he was the eldest living son he knew he would not be chosen to inherit. It is a tragic event.
- **Sheba's rebellion** followed in the wake of the Absalom debacle. Sheba, probably a relative of Saul's, moves in an attempt to separate Israel from Judah. While it is quickly crushed it is a sign of deep discontent and a warning for the future for those with eyes to read it.

Still the issue of throne succession remained unsolved. Bathsheba has been told that her son Solomon will reign; but Adonijah has strong support. Only when he publicly proclaims himself king (1Kgs 1:5-10) does David publicly state that Solomon is his choice (1Kgs 1:30).



However, David dies with something of a shadow – a household full of intrigue and a heart full of old resentments (1Kgs 2):

- Joab, his old friend was to be killed (vv5-6);
- Shimei, who cursed him but thought himself forgiven (vv8-9).

### **Solomon and grandeur**

'Solomon in all his glory ...' (Matt 6:29) became a Jewish maxim for kingdom and empire wealth. We know the king himself became a legend in his own lifetime. No Hebrew king reached a higher pinnacle of worldly splendour. His vast building programme, fabulous wealth, large harem, far-flung commercial enterprises, strong military force, patronage of wisdom and the arts all became the wonder of his subjects and visitors alike.

An 80-year-old Israelite living in Solomon's day would have been able to remember the closing years of the judges and would have marveled at the sweeping changes in the nation's fortunes much as a person of similar age today does about the 20th century.

Thanks to David's military genius in creating the empire; the fact that both Egypt and Assyria were both politically weak; and the help given by Hiram, King of Tyre in establishing trade links; the stage was set for an age of enormous material prosperity.

### **Wisdom and foolishness**

Solomon is difficult to evaluate. He was not a military figure like David; he had no need to be, as few enemies remained. He held the empire together by political shrewdness and international diplomacy. On coming to the throne he ruthlessly eliminated any challenge to his authority at home (Adonijah, Joab and Abiathar); Scripture says with a touch of irony, 'The kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon' (1Kgs 2:46)!

Having come to the throne the hard way, David was always in touch with the common people; Solomon never was. Born to 'the purple' he knew nothing apart from the extravagant life of the palace.

At the beginning of his reign he chooses 'a wise and understanding heart' (1Kgs 3:3-15), but as wealth pours into the nation his spirit pays the price for the glory and opulence. He begins by 'loving the Lord' (1Kgs 3:3) but in the end his foreign wives 'turned his heart to other gods' (1Kgs 11:4).

Solomon was clearly a great and able man. He had 'wisdom and understanding ... and largeness of mind like sand on the sea shore' (1Kgs 4:29). He inherited his father's artistic temperament in writing proverbs, poetry and songs (1Kgs 4:32-34). But the fruit of his life is marked more by the spirit of worldliness than the covenant. Of course he stood within the covenant, but what could his reign have been if his spirit had remained pure?

### **Pale picture and sad end**

In the glory of Solomon's reign, God, in divine goodness, is showing people just a little of what can happen, as the wealth of the nations pours into Zion. In physical terms so much of the covenant promise appears to be fulfilled, and yet it is clear that it is nothing but a shadow of God's ultimate purpose, only a pale glimpse of the ultimate glory God has for people. It is this that the prophets take up in their visions (cf. Isa. 60:4-7; 61:6 etc.). Sadly,



Solomon was not an individual of sufficient spirit to bring more significance to the events of his reign.

In 1Kings 9:1-9 God presents Solomon with the choice that had been Israel's so many times before. But instead of walking in 'integrity' and 'righteousness' (v4) he had 'turned aside' (v6). God's final judgment upon Solomon was that 'he was angry' and as a result the kingdom would be broken at his death and only a fragment remain in the control of his son; and that only because of the covenant made with David (1Kgs 11:9-13).

Solomon presents us with another chapter in Israel's conflict between 'faith' and 'culture'. Simplicity of faith and life had been swayed by luxury that gave way to unbelievable extravagance. In Solomon we see what happens when material benefits (a sign of God's blessing) are not rooted into strong covenant life.

Yahweh is jealous; the covenant, which reflects his character, is the only basis for existence. Solomon lacked the character to hold all the elements together and so ends his days in shallow glory, and at his death judgment falls.

### **Reign and influence**

As in the reign of his father David, Solomon had the political advantage that the great powers of his day, Mesopotamia and Egypt, were in a period of weakness and so there were limited threats from outside the empire. Solomon used this relative political peace to strengthen his power and influence. He did this in many ways:

- Marriages to surrounding royal houses; especially to an Egyptian princess;
- Alliances with Phoenicians [Hiram, king of Tyre] bring great trade from the west;
- Key cities are fortified [Jerusalem, Hazor, Megiddo and Gezer];
- Chariot forces are developed [1,400 chariots, 4,000 horses];
- Merchant fleet from Ezion-geber traded with Somaliland and southern Arabia;
- Overland caravan route into Arabia (Yemen–Sabia); the Queen of Sheba;
- Copper industry at Ezion-geber;
- Trade in horses from Cilicia and chariots from Egypt;
- The temple was built in Jerusalem.

### **Inadequacy of monarchy**

The 'golden age' of Solomon glittered but was not all it appeared. It brought wealth to a few, but slavery, taxation and drudgery to the majority. It brought a burden even greater than the tragic and prophetic words spoken by Samuel before Saul became king (1Sam 8:10-18).

In Solomon's kingdom, expenditure exceeded income. The building projects, his huge personal establishment and bureaucracy became liabilities. Everyone suffered increased taxation and many Israelites were made slaves. While the days of glory may point to something greater beyond, their experience brought a bitter taste to the mouth.

The monarchy, and the new society it brought, created a definite tension between it and the covenant demands of Yahweh and the early social structure. The leadership that the monarchy brought could be accommodated within the purposes of God, but it was only ever a shadow of what ought to be.





Both David and Solomon were brilliant; but they failed to bridge important gaps and they often suppressed problems rather than solving them. Even before Solomon's death there was rebellion in the north led by Jeroboam, the minister for labour. While he escaped to Egypt for a period, he was the person destined to trigger a whole new and tragic era in Israel's history.

## **Schism**

Solomon died in 922 BC, and with that event the empire that had been so brilliantly constructed by David and glorified by his son fell apart, to be replaced by two second-rate and rival states. For exactly 200 years they lived side by side, sometimes at war and sometimes in alliance. Finally, in 722 BC, the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel.

At his father's death, Rehoboam the son of Solomon travelled north to be installed as 'king of Israel', having been already recognised as king in Jerusalem. We have noted how the northern tribes had been smarting under Solomon's whiplash policies, and so quite rightly they demanded a promise that their load would be lightened before recognising Rehoboam as king.

Out of touch with the common people, Rehoboam would not hear their genuine request and declared that his father's treatment will be considered mild in comparison with his. This was the only spark the situation needed to ignite rebellion.

Spokesperson for the ten northern tribes was Jeroboam the Ephraimite, who had swiftly returned from Egypt where he had escaped from Solomon's reach. He was someone of considerable personal energy and ability (1Kgs 11:26-28). Rehoboam was surprised by the suddenness and ferocity of Israel's reaction and was forced to flee south in his chariot.

## **Collapse**

Israel and Judah had become so burdened by their internal problems that they had neither the will nor the power to prevent the empire of Solomon from crumbling overnight. It just fell to pieces by default.

Israel's Syrian provinces broke away and within a generation Damascus was posing a real threat. The Philistines, Moab and Ammon all appear to have broken free as well. However, Judah appears to have held access to the Gulf of Aqabah.

Whether Rehoboam had the power to have brought Israel to heel is a matter of debate among scholars; many believe he did. However, in the fifth year of his reign, Egypt, under its new and vigorous ruler Shishak, broke from three centuries of political lethargy and invaded Palestine. From the Temple inscription at Karnak, Luxor, we know he attacked 150 towns and villages and laid Judah and Israel very low (cf. 1Kgs 14:25-28). Fortunately, Shishak was unable to consolidate his gains due to weakness at home.

## **Jeroboam and change**

Jeroboam had the task of creating a state where none existed. He had no capital city, no administration and no army. He had to create a national faith that was able to withstand



the pull of the spiritual forces that continued in Judah and centred on Jerusalem. It is for this reason that the prophetic historians dismiss him as an idolatrous apostate. Though the Bible gives us little information about Jeroboam's 'reforms' we can say the following:

- He established his first capital in Shechem, he soon moved his administration to Tirzah;
- He established two shrines; one north in Dan and one south in Bethel, (both previously centres of pilgrimage); Bethel soon becomes the more important, also operating as the royal shrine;
- He established a priesthood that claimed direct links with Moses;
- He instituted an annual autumn festival, 'the feast of ingathering'; similar to the one in Judah but at a different time;
- He erected golden bulls, in both Bethel and Dan, as a focus for faith. This was a major step towards idolatry. Scripture compares them to the Golden Calf of the wilderness (1Kgs 12:28; Hosea 8:5-6).

## Israel and Judah

The years between 922 BC and 876 BC set the direction for future destinies for both kingdoms.

- **Israel** was always internally unstable, and during the first 50 years the throne changed hands violently three times. There was still the old longing for charismatic leadership. In 876 BC after a trail of intrigue and bloodshed, Omri, an army general, took hold of the reins. He had neither popular nor prophetic backing and took some years to quell the civil uproar that greeted him. He came to rule not a moment too soon. Omri brought stability after 50 years of instability. Though his reign was brief (876-869 BC), he established a dynasty that held power for three generations and had the respect of surrounding nations.<sup>1</sup>
- **Judah** By contrast with Israel, Judah's internal history makes rather dull reading. Because she continued with the house of David there were no dynastic changes. There was, however, increasing tension between the rich Jerusalem aristocracy and the poor rural population. Paganism was also slowly corrupting aspects of the faith. However, during the long reigns of Asa (913-873 BC) and his son Jehoshaphat (873-849 BC), extensive religious reforms and peace with Israel were established.

## Questions

1. What significance did establishing 'kingship' have for the children of Israel?
2. What was Samuel's contribution to the people of God in his day?
3. What is the significance of 'Jerusalem' in biblical thought?

## Reading and Resources

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<sup>1</sup> On the black obelisk of Shalmanezar, the Israelite King Jehu is called 'the son of Omri'; ironically he was the person who in fact destroyed the Omri dynasty!



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