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The Causes of the Division of Israel's Kingdom

Wayne A. Brindle

Solomon's kingdom was undoubtedly the Golden Age of Israel. The accomplishments of Solomon and the highlights of his reign include those things which all kings and empires sought, and most did not obtain.

A prominent feature of Solomon's rule was his preparation for defense. He fortified the key cities which ringed Israel's center: Hazor, Megiddo, Gezer, Beth-horon, and Baalath (1 Kings 9:15-19). He assembled as many as 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen, and maintained 4,000 stables in which to house the horses (1 Kings 10:26; 2 Chron. 9:25). And he kept a large standing army, which required enormous amounts of food and other provisions.¹

Solomon also had a much larger court than David's. He appointed 12 district supervisors (1 Kings 4) and as many as 550 supervisors of labor (1 Kings 9:23), who were in turn supervised by an overseer of district officers and a prime minister.² He had 1,000 wives or concubines, and probably had a large number of children.

To finance such extensive programs he developed at least three sources of national income. (1) Taxation provided the bulk of his support, and each district furnished provisions for the court and his family during one month of the year (1 Kings 4). (2) Some tribute and gifts were received from other nations, notably Sheba and Tyre (1 Kings 9-10). (3) Trade relationships were

developed with many areas, especially through Ezion-geber to the south and through Syria to the north. In addition he used many aliens and Israelites in his building projects (1 Kings 5:13; 9:21-22).

Solomon developed alliances with Egypt (through his marriage to a daughter of Pharaoh) and Tyre (Hiram I), among others, and received official visits from many foreign dignitaries including the Queen of Sheba.

His great building activities received much of his attention. It took him seven years to build the temple, which was completed in 960 B.C. During the next 13 years he built his own palace and other fine buildings (1 Kings 7:1-13) and the Millo ("supporting terraces," NIV) and part of a wall at Jerusalem (1 Kings 9:15).

Solomon also apparently concentrated heavily on literary and philosophical pursuits, becoming renowned for his wisdom and his writing much of the wisdom literature of the Bible. He spoke some 3,000 proverbs and composed 1,005 songs, besides studying and analyzing much of nature (1 Kings 4:32-33).

All these facts about the splendor of Solomon's reign heighten the surprise one feels when he reads in 1 Kings 12 that Solomon's empire crumbled almost immediately after his death. How could such a thing occur? To seek to answer that question, this article analyzes the underlying causes of the division of the kingdom of Israel in 931 B.C.

Tribal Jealousy

According to McClain, even before the death of Solomon the sickness of the nation was clearly evident. One of the reasons, he believes, was that "the tribes had always been jealous of their independency and rights."³ Mercer contends that tribal jealousy was actually the primary cause of the division of the monarchy.⁴

The cry of the people of Israel in Rehoboam's day may provide a key to a major underlying cause of the division. When Rehoboam, Solomon's son, refused to listen to the plea of the people for an easier burden, they said to him (and to each other): "What portion do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse; To your tents, O Israel! Now look after your own house, David!" (1 Kings 12:16).

This cry is similar to the declaration of Sheba when he initiated a revolt under David. According to 2 Samuel 20:1, Sheba stated, "We have no portion in David, nor do we have

inheritance in the son of Jesse; every man to his tent, O Israel!" These statements are probably not declarations of war or slogans of active rebellion, but rather simply words of disbandment and a refusal to participate any further in the Davidic line and covenant.⁵

The revolt under Sheba came about simply because the tribe of Judah wanted to emphasize the fact that David was of Judah. The 10 northern tribes accused Judah of treating them contemptuously, and Judah responded rather harshly (2 Sam. 19–20). The motive for the rebellion was simply "inter-tribal jealousy over the pre-eminence of Judah and its favorite son, David."⁶ It is likely, therefore, that the rebellion under Jeroboam had the same roots.

This tribal jealousy can be traced back to Jacob's wives. Leah (the mother of Judah) and Rachel (the mother of Joseph and grandmother of Ephraim) were dreadfully jealous of each other, especially concerning the bearing of sons and receiving the love of Jacob (Gen. 29–30). The tribal jealousy between Judah and Ephraim originated with the two groups formed by Leah and Zilpah (Leah's handmaiden) and their children, on the one hand, and by Rachel and Bilhah (Rachel's handmaiden) and their children, on the other hand.⁷

Jacob contributed to this jealousy through his obvious favoritism for Rachel, and later for Rachel's sons, Joseph and Benjamin. When Jacob met Esau on his return from Aram, Jacob placed Rachel and Joseph in the safest position in his group (Gen. 33:1-2). Reuben's birthright was later transferred to Joseph (because of Reuben's sin), which further aggravated the jealousy and ill feelings between the brothers (1 Chron. 5:1-2).

Later a fierce rivalry developed between Judah and Joseph and their respective tribes. Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons (Gen. 37). But in Jacob's final blessing he predicted that the other brothers would bow down to Judah and that Judah would have the scepter among them (Gen. 49). In the wilderness wanderings the tribe of Judah led the way, while the tribes of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) were near the end (Num. 2).

During much of the Conquest and the period of the Judges, the ark of the covenant was kept in Shiloh in the territory of Ephraim (Judg. 18:31; 1 Sam. 1:3). An Ephraimite, Samuel, anointed the first two kings of Israel.

The jealousy between the tribes of Judah and Ephraim grew especially during the reigns of David and Solomon. David

attempted to gain the confidence of the north, by, for example, thanking the men of Jabesh-Gilead for burying Saul (2 Sam. 2:5-7); by marrying Maachah, the daughter of Talmi of Geshur (2 Sam. 3:3); by forming an alliance with Abner (2 Sam. 3:20-21); and by avenging the murder of Ish-bosheth (2 Sam. 4:12). Solomon, however, did a number of things that added to the jealousy of the north against Judah.

For instance, when Solomon formed his 12 districts for the purposes of taxation and supplying the needs of his court, he did not include Judah (1 Kings 4). Judah apparently had tax-free status.⁸ Most of the district appointees were also Judahites or pro-Judahites (1 Kings 4:11-16). In addition Solomon's building projects were concentrated in Judah (the temple, the palace, the Millo and wall of Jerusalem, Ezion-geber, the copper mines, Debir, etc.), whereas most of the taxes and forced laborers came from the northern tribes. Psalm 78:67-68 probably shows the feelings of the Ephraimites at that time: "He also rejected the tent of Joseph, and did not choose the tribe of Ephraim, but chose the tribe of Judah . . ." When it is recalled that Ephraim, because of its dominance, became a synonym for Israel (the Northern Kingdom; cf. 2 Chron. 25:7, 10; Ps. 60:7; 78:9; Isa. 7:2, 5, 8-9, 17; Hos. 4:17; 5:3, 5, 11-12), it is not surprising that God's choice of Jerusalem as His holy city and of Judah as the tribe through which the Messiah would come would result in intense jealousy and envy in the north.

This jealousy among the tribes may actually be the root cause of the division of the kingdom. But there were several other causes, too.

Sectionalism

Halpern contends that "it was largely through military policies dictated by sectional Judahite interest that Solomon effectively alienated the population of northern Israel."⁹ This is related to tribal jealousy, but is slightly different in that the term "sectionalism" emphasizes not the tribes involved but rather the division of the nation into north and south, specifically Solomon's concentration on the development and protection of the south. His Judah-centric policies may be seen in two major issues: revolts in the territories and the sale of the "Cabul."

Halpern believes that from 950 B.C. on, Egypt was a growing threat to Israel.¹⁰ That is the year in which Shishak ascended the

Egyptian throne and began a drastic revitalization of the military forces of Egypt. In reaction to this, Solomon put little emphasis on defense against the Arameans to the north, and concentrated on building his defenses to the south. In this sense he was taxing the north to defend the south, while leaving the north relatively defenseless.

Solomon lost two small territories to revolts during much of his reign. King Hadad apparently returned from Egypt and succeeded in making himself king in Edom and causing much grief for Solomon (1 Kings 11:21-22, 25). Bright says that Solomon, out of concern for his international trade through Ezion-geber, maintained control of Edom. « In the north, however, Rezon son of Eliada seized Damascus and reigned there throughout most of Solomon's reign, and founded a dynasty of kings which endured until the Assyrians under Shalmaneser invaded Damascus in 841. « Apparently Solomon never tried to recapture Damascus, possibly because of the constant threat of Egyptian invasion from the south.

If that is so, the Arameans would have presented a grave threat to the security of the northern tribes. The obvious conclusion is that Solomon "reflected a preoccupation with and predilection for affairs of Judahite defense." « The northern tribes would have sensed this inequity and would have jumped at the first opportunity to revolt.

The crowning blow was the alienation of the Cabul region from Israel. « Solomon apparently sold or gave Hiram of Tyre 20 towns in northern Galilee in return for his help with Solomon's building projects in Jerusalem (1 Kings 9:10-13). Hiram did not approve of the towns when he saw them, and they were possibly returned to Solomon. Such an insensitive and inhumane attitude toward the people of the north would also have impressed the thought of revolt on their minds.

Halpern believes that the money which Solomon obtained for the Cabul towns was specifically used for building projects in the south. « Since the transaction was made soon after the completion of the royal palace (1 Kings 9), which is dated about 24 years after Solomon began his reign, the Cabul towns must have been sold about 946 B.C. (Halpern says 950.) This is about the time Shishak rose to power in Egypt. That was also when Solomon appointed Jeroboam as director of the forced labor of Ephraim (1 Kings 11:28), and when work began on the Millo and the wall of Jerusalem. Perhaps the building of the Millo and the wall

contributed to Jeroboam's rebellion (1 Kings 11:27). If this chronology is correct, then apparently Jeroboam's rebellion represented his reaction against the attitude of Solomon by which he sold Galilean cities to pay for building projects at Jerusalem and defenses against the growing Egyptian threat. Halpern concludes as follows:

So Solomon, with his treasury depleted by lavish expenditures on Temple construction and on preparations for the dedication, found himself forced to sell crown possessions in order to obtain the capital necessary for the repair of the fortresses. In all likelihood, the sale of the northern land, which made southern fortification possible, and not the simple fortification of the south, was responsible for Jeroboam's coup.⁶

Solomon actually stripped the north to clothe the south. The issue, then, was Solomon's sectionally oriented policy of expenditure. Thus when Rehoboam arrived at Shechem for his coronation, he had a depleted treasury, an inadequate system of defense against Egypt, and the intention of raising taxes in Israel to remedy both of these Judahite problems. No wonder the people of the north refused to go along with his totally insensitive attitude.

Halpern concludes, however, that Rehoboam actually had nowhere to turn. To retain the high taxation and forced labor was to split the empire; to reduce the burden was to forego security from Egyptian attack. He actually lost both, since Egypt successfully invaded Judah about five years later.⁷

Solomonic Exploitation

David Ben-Gurion, former prime minister of Israel, lays most of the blame for the division of the kingdom at Solomon's door:

I see the matter as follows: Solomon, during his latter years, adopted an increasingly oppressive policy. True, he introduced foreign trade and increased the national income to a very great extent. But his wisdom seemed to have failed him in his last days when his hand grew heavy upon the people. After all, 1,400 chariots, 12,000 horsemen, and considerable infantry were a burdensome yoke in those days. He built his foreign policy around international marriages, not necessarily through love of foreign women as much as a desire to keep the peace. But all this engendered hatred toward the regime and full-scale opposition against Solomon.⁸

Many of Solomon's problems were economic. Building projects, military fortifications, ship construction, and foreign trade required the labor of men. The aliens living in Palestine were first

pressed into service (1 Kings 9:15-21), whereas military service was limited to Israelites (1 Kings 9:22-23). But later, in addition to this, Solomon began to draft his own countrymen into forced labor — 30,000 men who worked in Lebanon and elsewhere were to work one month out of every three (1 Kings 5:13-14). This forced-labor system had been intolerable for the Israelites in Egypt, and now they were required to do the same in their *own* land.

In addition, Solomon needed more and more wealth in order to maintain his huge government and the luxury of his own court. David had been able to take in wealth by means of military victories. But Solomon had to turn to internal income, namely, taxation. Such taxation had become so burdensome that the only request that the people made of Rehoboam was to reduce their burden (1 Kings 12:4). Solomon's sale of 20 Galilean cities to Hiram of Tyre must have seemed horrifying to the vast majority of Israelites.

Solomon's personal pride and selfishness certainly contributed to the problem. His stress on industry took many people away from the land. His added tax for the supply of his wasteful court was extremely overdone. His vast building operations, though improving his power and prestige, did little to help his own people. He overtaxed his economic capacities by wasting much of his wealth and manpower.¹⁹ The people soon realized that they were being sacrificed for personal enrichment rather than for national welfare. The king began to spend more than he could take in, which forced him to sell land and cities and to lose control of strategic trade routes. Unrest continued to increase. As Clewell says, "The golden age was tarnished by a basically unsound system of economics perpetuated by the insatiable greed of the monarch. His reign culminated Israel's material greatness and brief excursion as an empire."²⁰

Solomon wanted to be a king like all the other nations that he so admired. For this reason he amassed enormous wealth, a large number of wives, and built several fortress cities. McClain contends that the original mistake of Israel was not in asking for a *king*, but rather in asking for a king "like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:19-20).²¹ One real difference between various kinds of government is found in the *price* people must pay for the benefits a government can provide (especially order and safety). Having a "king like all the nations" may have had a low cost at the beginning, but inevitably the "price" increased.

McClain points to Samuel's prophecy concerning kingship (1 Sam. 8:7-20) and suggests how this model of kingly exploitation was fulfilled in Solomon: (1) the king would bring the people into government service (8:11-13 — horsemen, cavalymen, military commanders, farmers, manufacturers, perfumers, cooks, and bakers); (2) he would make jobs for them (8:11-12 — "commanders," "they will run before his chariots"); (3) he would create labor shortages (8:11, 13, 16 — "he will take your sons," "he will also take your daughters," "he will also take your . . . servants"); (4) he would be interested mainly in the support and perpetuation of himself and his government (8:11-12, 16 — "for himself," "his harvest," "his work"); (5) he would impose burdensome taxation (8:15, 17 — "a tenth of your seed and of your vineyards," "a tenth of your flocks"); (6) he would take over the basic sources of wealth (8:14 — "your fields," "your vineyards," etc.); (7) his government would soon be corrupt (8:15 — "give to his officers and to his servants"); (8) he would exercise totalitarian control over the nation (8:17 — "you yourselves will become his servants"); and (9) the oppression would one day be intolerable (8:18 — "You will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves").²²

This was graphically fulfilled in Solomon's reign, and was probably even worse under Rehoboam. The people of the northern tribes saw their opportunity to rebel.

Solomonic Apostasy

If David's life can be called a life of "conviction," then Solomon's life was a life of "compromise." Possibly his prayer at the dedication of the temple represented his genuine convictions (1 Kings 8:22-53), but perhaps he was simply mouthing words he had heard his father and the priests use.

Solomon gradually entered into open violation of the first three divine rules Yahweh had given to govern the conduct of kings: (1) he multiplied military forces, gathering chariots and horsemen (1 Kings 10:26, 28; cf. Deut. 17:16); (2) he loved many foreign women, gathering 1,000 wives or concubines from many nations (1 Kings 11:1-4; cf. Deut. 17:17); (3) he amassed silver and gold, and even the vessels of his own house were made of pure gold (1 Kings 10:21, 27; cf. Deut. 17:17).

Along with all his wealth, then, came moral deterioration and religious apostasy, since his many wives "turned his heart

away after other gods" (1 Kings 11:4). Solomon permitted the thinking and customs of other nations to influence his decisions and manner of living. His many marriages to foreign women were far more than efforts to seal foreign alliances. The extent of his defection is shown by the fact that he built a "high place" to "Chemosh the detestable idol of Moab" and to "Molech the detestable idol of the sons of Ammon" (1 Kings 11:7), and similar idols for the false gods of *all* his foreign wives (1 Kings 11:8).

The Lord's explanation for the division of the kingdom is given in 1 Kings 11:9-12:

Now the Lord was angry with Solomon because his heart was turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods; but he did not observe what the Lord had commanded. So the Lord said to Solomon, "Because you have done this, and you have not kept My covenant and My statutes, which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you, and will give it to your servant. Nevertheless I will not do it in your days for the sake of your father David, but I will tear it out of the hand of your son."

The Lord apparently had two things against Solomon: (1) he had turned away from the Lord to go after other gods, and (2) he had not obeyed or kept the Lord's covenant and statutes. The penalty for this was to have most of the kingdom torn away from his son and given to a man who was actually Solomon's servant (Jeroboam).

Mercer suggests that Solomon specifically broke the covenant stipulations of Exodus 20:3-6 (no other gods and no idols) and of Exodus 20:22-23; Deuteronomy 4:15-19, 25-28; 5:7-9; 7:3-4 (no intermarriage with unbelieving foreigners).²³ Solomon's sin struck at the heart of the theocracy; to follow other gods in any sense was to deny the covenant with Yahweh and make the new temple a farce.

Apparently Solomon's marriages to foreign wives led to his disobedience and the resultant division of the kingdom. "His wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been" (1 Kings 11:3-4).

These marriages were made for political reasons. In 1 Kings 11:3 Solomon's 700 wives are called "princesses" ("wives of royal birth," NIV), thus emphasizing the fact that they (or most of them, at least) were the daughters of foreign government officials. For example, he married the daughter of Pharaoh (1 Kings 3:1) to

seal an alliance; Naamah the Ammonitess (1 Kings 14:21, 31); and women from Moab, Ammon, Edom, Sidon, and Aram (1 Kings 11:1). All these nations bordered on or were near the nation of Israel.

These marriages were wrong not simply because they led Solomon into idolatry. The author of 1 Kings implied that Solomon was not even to associate with the people of these nations — probably in the sense of “joining together” with or “fellowshipping” with them, which would certainly bar intermarriage with their women (1 Kings 11:2). If these women had become Jewish proselytes or converts, perhaps the story would have been different. But as it was, they remained pagans and brought their own gods with them, apparently insisting that a place of worship be installed for them. This could never have been harmonized with Yahweh’s Law and will. In addition, the Law commanded kings not to “multiply wives” (Deut. 17:17), a commandment Solomon grossly violated.

Early in his reign Solomon had been warned against such apostasy (1 Kings 3:14; 9:4-9). Severe conflict and dislocation would follow any straying from God’s Law and covenant. For only faithfulness to the Lord in carrying out His stipulations could forge a bond capable of holding the tribes of Israel together; and now the apostasy of Solomon severed that bond (1 Kings 11:1-10).

Because of the judgment which God pronounced on Solomon and his kingdom, and in the various factors that contributed to the division, God’s sovereignty and providence were at work everywhere. Through the Prophet Ahijah, the secession was authorized directly by the Lord as a divine judgment on the chosen nation and its mediatorial king,²⁴ working through Jeroboam, who was eminently qualified to lead a rebellion. After God announced to Solomon His judgment on him, the Lord raised up at least two “adversaries” (1 Kings 11:14, 23), Rezon and Hadad, to trouble Solomon on the north and south. Later, after the division had taken effect, God sent the Prophet Shemaiah to Rehoboam to declare, “Thus says the Lord, ‘You must not go up and fight against your relatives the sons of Israel; return every man to his house, for this thing has come from Me’” (1 Kings 12:24).

Jacob had predicted that “the scepter shall not depart from Judah” (Gen. 49:10). Determined to continue working with the line of David as He had promised, God brought forth a number of

righteous kings in David's line (e.g., Hezekiah, Joash, Josiah) before finally sending the people into captivity for their sin and apostasy, in preparation for the coming Messiah. As Orelli observes:

. . . the smaller and often overpowered kingdom of Judah, which faithfully adhered to the royal line of David, passed through dangerous crises and had many unworthy rulers. But the legitimate royal house, which had been selected by Jehovah, constituted spiritually a firm bond, which kept the people united, as is seen, e.g., by a glance at the addresses of Isaiah, who is thoroughly filled with the conviction of the importance of the house of David, no matter how unworthy the king who happened to rule might appear to him.²⁵

Notes

- 1 Leon Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), p. 290.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), p. 106.
- 4 Mark K. Mercer, "Tribal Jealousy and the Division of the Monarchy following the Reign of Solomon" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979), pp. 55-65.
- 5 Abraham Malamat, "Organs of Statecraft in the Israelite Monarchy," *Biblical Archaeologist* 28 (1965):39-40.
- 6 Mercer, "Tribal Jealousy," p. 58.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- 9 Baruch Halpern, "Sectionalism and the Schism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974):519.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 520-23. Halpern's dates seem to be off by five years, but this does not negate his argument (Shishak actually began to reign in 945 B.C.).
- 11 John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), pp. 209-10.
- 12 Halpern, "Sectionalism," p. 521.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 522.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 524.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History*, p. 339.
- 18 David Ben-Gurion, cited in Malamat, "Organs of Statecraft," p. 52.
- 19 Richard D. Clewell, "The Effect of Solomon's Reign on the Nation of Israel" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1962), p. 58.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 21 McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 110.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 110-12.
- 23 Mercer, "Tribal Jealousy," p. 7.
- 24 McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 7.
- 25 *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1939 ed., s.v. "Israel, History of," by C. von Orelli, 3:1520.



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