

is to follow traditional beliefs about the authors of books in order not to become mired in scholarly debate. There is wide room for disagreement about authorship when a book doesn't say who wrote it. The Song says it belongs to Solomon, but that could equally mean a dedication. Likewise, Ecclesiastes alludes to Solomon, but never claims him as author.

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Power Encounters

1 Kings 15–2 Kings 12, 2 Chronicles 13–24

Stalemate

Israel and Judah split because petty despots fancied themselves grand monarchs and refused to submit to a Lord who had the whole people's interests at heart. The result was pathetic. For two centuries, Israel and Judah played a triangle game with Syria. Two of the nations would ally against the third until it was defeated. Then the two would turn on each other. When one feared conquest, it would send money to the third to make a treaty, and the cycle would repeat. This went on until Egypt and Assyria grew strong enough to play, too, and between them gobbled the three others up. (See map, page 342.)

In the meantime the game bled the resources—human and financial—of all three players. Judah fared best because its rugged topography made it less accessible, because it had a stable ruling dynasty, and because Yahweh was faithful to His promise to David. Israel was battered by coups and assassinations; in two hundred years it went through twenty kings from nine families, while Judah went through twelve (including one usurping queen) from one family during the same period. At that point, Assyria destroyed Israel but Judah survived.

The prophetic author of 1 and 2 Kings assessed each ruler according to the covenant standard. Using David as the standard for an A, he evaluated the Judah kings' faithfulness to Yahweh (from Rehoboam to the Babylonian Captivity) and came up with ten Fs, two Ds, one C, three Bs, three A minuses, and only one fairly solid A, Josiah. And the bright spots in Judah were unparalleled in Israel; all her kings failed. Yahweh did not grade on a curve.

Only one royal family in Israel really succeeded in becoming a dynasty, and it proved to be the most dangerous of all to Yahweh's plan. Through that family, the Snake nearly succeeded, not only in corrupting Israel to the point of no return, but also in exterminating the house of David in Judah. The tactics were military force and politics, but also witchcraft and deception on an unprecedented scale. Yahweh fought back as He had not since the days of Moses and Joshua. Open demonic activity invited open divine response, and (as the Serpent well knew by now) Yahweh's plan depended upon the lineage of David.

Omri

For fifty years after the split, things degenerated. Judah endured two worthless kings, then began struggling back under the long reign of Asa. Israel went through five kings, spent six in civil war, then finally settled down to eleven stable years under the victor, Omri.

He was as shrewd as Jeroboam and realized that to compete with Judah he needed a capital of equal splendor. So he bought a hill near Shechem, named it Samaria after its former owner, and built on it a citadel to rival the fortress of Zion. Omri began, and his son completed, work on grand palaces, administrative quarters, and homes like those Solomon had erected in Jerusalem. In Samaria the houses of the rich priests, nobles, and bureaucrats who served the thriving kingdom were divided from the poor neighborhood by a wall. (Jerusalem definitely had uptown and downtown; the best real estate was upwind from cooking and sewage odors. But nobody had thought of a wall.)

Omri put Israel on the map; his dynasty lasted only forty-four years, but a century and a half later the Assyrians were still

calling Israel "the house of Omri." Omri did his best to copy Solomon's Egyptian-style administration.

He also imitated Solomon in making foreign alliances; he married his son Ahab to the Phoenician princess Jezebel. When Ahab became king, he topped Jeroboam by building a temple for Jezebel's god Baal in Samaria itself and dropping all pretense of worshipping Yahweh. Baal became the official state god — a mockery of Yahweh's kingship in Jerusalem.

Ahab, Jezebel, and Elijah

In response, Yahweh brought in the big guns. Ahab's predecessors had tolerated Yahweh's prophets and hadn't even executed them when they graphically prophesied the kings' deaths. They took Yahweh seriously enough not to mess with His envoys. At this time the prophets were grouped in companies — communities in which one who felt called to serve Yahweh could reside and learn with other likeminded people. They lived in austerity on the fringes of the increasingly depraved Israelite society to protest the nation's materialism, and generally didn't bother the king unless Yahweh had a message for him (which wasn't often). Probably they spent most of their time imploring Yahweh not to let their country go to the dogs.

However, Jezebel was a practicing witch, an all-out Viper's daughter and enemy of Yahweh. But He had been grooming a prophet of the stature of Moses and Samuel: Elijah (the name meant "Yahweh is God"). This tough desert dweller in camel-hair shorts arrived in Samaria one day with an official notice: Israel belonged to Yahweh. If her kings and priests did not recognize Him as their Sovereign, they were in treason. If they thought Baal the storm god was better than the gods of Egypt and Canaan whom Yahweh had dealt with in the past, they were mistaken. And to prove that Baal, Jezebel, and every pagan priest from Hamath to Jericho shouting together couldn't squeeze one drop out of the sky, there would be neither dew nor rain in Israel until Elijah said so.

That was it. Elijah walked out. He went out east alone and Yahweh provided food until the brooks all dried up. Then he went to Sidon (Jezebel's home territory!) and Yahweh directed him to a

starving widow. He stayed with her, while Yahweh miraculously replenished her supply of oil and grain. When her son fell ill and died, Yahweh enabled Elijah to raise him from the dead. Yahweh's point: *Unlike Baal, I can take care of My own. And if My people want to spit in My face, I can find faithful people to bless in the seedbed of paganism itself. Remember, My covenant with Israel is for the sake of the nations.*

Single Combat

Nearly three years passed, and Ahab didn't get the message. Jezebel began massacring Yahweh's prophets until Ahab's chief of staff resorted to hiding a hundred of them in two caves and bringing supplies secretly. Yahweh could have let the nation starve, but He had compassion even on traitors. So He sent Elijah back to face Jezebel's prophets.

The challenge was simple. Jezebel's 850 prophets would set up one bull for a burnt offering, and Elijah would set up another. The god who sent fire to consume his sacrifice was the real God; the other was a fake. The people gathered at the site on Mount Carmel agreed to take this single combat as proof.

Baal's prophets exhausted themselves in ecstatic dances, shouting, and slashing themselves to arouse him to act. Elijah poked fun ("Shout louder! Maybe he's asleep! Maybe he's relieving himself!") to underscore the absurdity of carrying on like this for a nonexistent god. Finally, as evening was coming, Elijah arranged his sacrifice and told the bystanders to pour water on it until even a trench around it was filled. Nothing up my sleeve.

Then Elijah prayed briefly, and lightning struck his sacrifice and consumed the bull, the wood, and even the water in the trench. The people fell prostrate and cried, "Yahweh is God!" At Elijah's order they slaughtered the priests of Baal.

Elijah sent them off to eat while he prayed for rain. When at last a cloud appeared on the horizon, he told Ahab to get down the mountain before the storm stopped him. And full of the Spirit of God, Elijah ran before Ahab's chariot some twenty miles to Jezreel.

Ahab could not have had a more solid incentive to abandon his wife's god and lead the nation back to Yahweh. But although

he was stubborn, he lacked real backbone. He could put on a good macho show to cover up his essentially weak masculinity, but Jezebel controlled him. Ahab informed her of the events on Carmel; she sent a death threat to Elijah; and then Ahab did nothing.

Elijah was crushed. As he saw it, Yahweh had played His trump card and it had made no ultimate difference. Like many people, he apparently assumed that if Yahweh would demonstrate His majesty publicly, everyone would turn to love and faithfulness. But with the witch still in charge, there would be no national repentance. He had failed. The Snake had won.

But Yahweh had known since Eden that power would not win love. He had made a real offer and had stripped Israel of the excuse that He was absent and silent, but the results did not surprise Him. And while He loved this crusty prophet, He couldn't have him sulking in a cave in the Sinai desert. (Ironically, Elijah had fled to Horeb, where so many years ago Yahweh had twisted a discouraged Moses' arm into leading Israel out of Egypt.) This time, Yahweh showed His envoy a little object lesson.

Fireworks isn't My trump card. I can come in storm and wind when I want to. But you know that mostly those aren't My style. Mostly I come in a whisper to people like you who are willing to listen. And there are seven thousand more in Israel who are listening. So don't give up – I haven't. We're not going to beat this Snake with pyrotechnics. You'll see: It's only going to take a whisper.

Elisha

But it was going to be a loud whisper for a while with opponents like Jezebel still at large. Yahweh gave Ahab every chance, miraculously intervening in battles against Syria, and sending prophet after prophet to encourage him or get in his face with tough reality checks. He did humble himself before Yahweh enough to die in battle instead of murder. But he kept letting his wife cajole him into acting like a Phoenician tyrant, and he had no respect for Yahweh's messengers.

Ahab's eldest son carried on his tradition; he died without heir, having consulted a Philistine god for healing and having tried to murder Elijah. His brother Joram succeeded him. Early

in Joram's reign, Elijah was taken into Heaven in a flaming chariot, and his office as Israel's head prophet passed to his protégé, Elisha.

Now Elisha had the nerve to ask for a double dose of Elijah's spirit (a.k.a. Yahweh's Spirit) in his life. And Yahweh (who likes that kind of spunk if it accompanies humility and love) granted the request. The national cleansing for which Elijah had prayed and sweated, Elisha led into being. Elisha did twice as many spectacular miracles as his mentor.

The miracles were eye-catching exhibits of Yahweh's character. Some (such as a famine) trumpeted judgment against Israel's depravity. Many more displayed His compassion upon the innocent (helpless widows and hungry prophets) who suffered for that depravity along with the guilty. Some were to protect Israel and Judah from destruction by Syria. And one was yet another reminder that Yahweh's plan concerned more than twelve tribes.

Syria's commander-in-chief received healing from leprosy because he humbled himself enough to obey a seemingly childish instruction from Elisha; this adversary of Israel went away with such respect for the God of Israel that he took back some dirt in order to worship Him on His native soil. It was a disgrace: the glory of Yahweh was under the noses of Israel's leaders every day, and they failed to perceive it, while a foreigner was overcome by it on his first encounter. Who were the real chosen people?

Yahweh gave Joram twelve years of Elisha's miracles to catch on to what Israel was supposed to be about—being a light to people like this Syrian officer. Joram did take down the phallic symbol in honor of Baal that had adorned the capital in Ahab's day. But it was a weak gesture, and finally Yahweh told Elisha to put an end to Omri's dynasty.

Jehu

The selected instrument was Jehu, an Israelite army commander and opportunist. After being anointed by one of Elisha's prophetic students, Jehu led his men out to meet Joram and his nephew Ahaziah, the king of Judah, as they were returning from battle against Syria. He dispatched them, then rode to make

short work of the witch-queen mother, Jezebel. Then followed a bloodbath of the remaining seventy male heirs of Ahab, all of their supporters, and every Baal-worshiper Jehu could find.

Yahweh rewarded this thoroughness with a promise to give Jehu a four-generation dynasty. But Jehu was no more faithful to Yahweh than Jeroboam had been, so Yahweh allowed Syria to slowly whittle Israel away. There would be blood and more blood until the nation recognized on whom its life depended.

Athaliah and the Attempted Takeover of Judah

All the same, Yahweh-worship was legal again in Israel and the poison of Jezebel was neutralized. But not before it had infected Judah. This was the Serpent's real goal.

Let's catch up a little on events to the south. Early in the reign of Ahab, when Jezebel was just getting rolling, Jehoshaphat inherited the throne of Judah. Like his father Asa, Jehoshaphat was basically a good king, appointing honest judges and doing his best to quell the Baal-worship Rehoboam had encouraged. Under Asa and Jehoshaphat there were basically good relations among the priests who taught the law of Yahweh, the king who administered the law, and the prophets who assessed how well the nation and its leaders were keeping the law.

But Asa and Jehoshaphat had one weakness: when threatened with war, they tended to make foreign alliances rather than trusting Yahweh. Prophet after prophet rebuked both father and son for doing this. Yahweh enabled miraculous victories when the kings took the risk to ally with Him only. But they didn't get the message.

This no-alliance rule wasn't a petty whim of Yahweh's. It was given to prevent the near disaster that occurred because Jehoshaphat allied with Ahab. Jehoshaphat married his son Jehoram to Ahab's daughter Athaliah. Now unity among the twelve tribes was a great idea, but this was neither the time nor the method with Israel such a cesspool of witchcraft.

The result was that Athaliah (who was a spiritual daughter of Jezebel in every way, if not her physical daughter also) corrupted Jehoram. Her Jezebel style was evident when early in his reign Jehoram murdered all of his brothers so as to have no rivals

for the throne. Things got so bad that Elijah himself wrote a warning to Jehoram, but the king ignored the letter and contracted the illness Yahweh sent to punish his wickedness. Jehoram was such an appalling king that his people refused even to give him a royal funeral or bury him in the royal crypt.

All of Jehoram's sons but one—Ahaziah—had died in a Philistine attack. His mother, Athaliah, controlled Ahaziah's every move, and he would have been as poisonous a king as his father if Jehu had not killed him along with Joram when seizing the kingship of Israel.

When Athaliah saw that the Yahwists had killed both her nephew Joram and her son Ahaziah, she was ripe to fulfill her Viper Lord's scheme. She set about slaughtering every surviving person descended from David, including her own grandsons. When apparently all were dead, she proclaimed herself queen of Judah.

If Athaliah had succeeded, the Davidic lamp would have been extinguished and the kings of Israel would have claimed Judah when she died, since she was a daughter of an Israelite king. There would have been no son of David to fulfill the prophecies, and Israel would have been a united pagan nation.

But Athaliah's sister-in-law hid an infant son of Ahaziah. For six years a priest named Jehoiada nurtured the child, while Athaliah ruled. At last Jehoiada staged a quick coup and crowned Joash.

Joash ruled well until Jehoiada's death. And even though later he turned rotten and murdered Jehoiada's prophet-son for denouncing him, and even though his own officials eventually assassinated him in return, the house of David survived in his sons.

Enforcing the Covenant

2 Kings 13–17, Amos, Hosea, Jonah

Prophetic Portfolios

Yahweh gears His tactics to fit the situation. His use of prophets is a case in point.

David needed counselors who would guide and support him in his commitment to serve Yahweh. His Lord sent Gad and Nathan. Solomon wanted no prophets, and got none. When the nation split, the southern prophets continued to follow the pattern of Nathan to the degree that the kings imitated David. Prophets, priests, and kings worked together in the good times. In the bad times, the prophets were often silent, as under Solomon.

Things were different in the northern kingdom. The trouble there was not just a diluting of Yahweh-worship, but a total sellout to Baal or Jeroboam's state-run pseudo-Yahwism. The lines between good and evil were sharp. The Enemy's tactics included open witchcraft. Open supernatural assault demanded overt confrontation: the power encounters and miracles of Elijah/Elisha.

In the background, of course, there were always "the sons of the prophets," members of the prophetic communities who supported the plan through hidden intercession and who recorded