

2 Kings 17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 2 Kings chapter 17 As he had done year by year.

Therefore the king of Assyria shut him up and bound him in prison. Then the king of Assyria invaded all the land and came to Samaria, and for three years he besieged it. In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria, and placed them in Hela and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.

And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt, from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods, and walked in the customs of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had practiced.

And the people of Israel did secretly against the Lord their God things that were not right. They built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city. They set up for themselves pillars and asherim on every high hill and under every green tree.

And there they made offerings on all the high places, as the nations did whom the Lord carried away before them. And they did wicked things, provoking the Lord to anger. And they served idols, of which the Lord had said to them, You shall not do this.

[1 : 43] Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, Turn from your evil ways, and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law that I commanded your fathers, and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets.

But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the Lord their God. They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and the warnings that he gave them.

They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the Lord had commanded them, that they should not do like them. And they abandoned all the commandments of the Lord their God, and made for themselves metal images of two calves.

And they made an asherah, and worshipped all the host of heaven and served Baal. And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings, and used divination and omens, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger.

Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight. None was left but the tribe of Judah only. Judah also did not keep the commandments of the Lord their God, but walked in the customs that Israel had introduced.

[2 : 55] And the Lord rejected all the descendants of Israel, and afflicted them, and gave them into the hand of plunderers, until he had cast them out of his sight. When he had torn Israel from the house of David, they made Jeroboam the son of Nebat king.

And Jeroboam drove Israel from following the Lord, and made them commit great sin. The people of Israel walked in all the sins that Jeroboam did. They did not depart from them, until the Lord removed Israel out of his sight, as he had spoken by all his servants the prophets.

So Israel was exiled from their own land, to Assyria, until this day. And the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthur, Ava, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria, instead of the people of Israel.

And they took possession of Samaria, and lived in its cities. And at the beginning of their dwelling there, they did not fear the Lord. Therefore the Lord sent lions among them, which killed some of them.

So the king of Assyria was told, The nations that you have carried away, and placed in the cities of Samaria, do not know the law of the God of the land. Therefore he has sent lions among them, and behold, they are killing them, because they do not know the law of the God of the land.

[4 : 07] Then the king of Assyria commanded, Send there one of the priests, whom you carried away from there, and let him go and dwell there, and teach them the law of the God of the land. So one of the priests, whom they had carried away from Samaria, came and lived in Bethel, and taught them how they should fear the Lord.

But every nation still made gods of its own, and put them in the shrines of the high places that the Samaritans had made, every nation in the cities in which they lived. The men of Babylon made Succoth Benoth, the men of Kuth made Nergal, the men of Hamath made Ashima, and the Avites made Nibhaz and Tartak, and the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire to Adramalek and Anamalek, the gods of Sepharvaim.

They also feared the Lord, and appointed from among themselves all sorts of people as priests of the high places, who sacrificed for them in the shrines of the high places. So they feared the Lord, but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away.

To this day they do according to the former manner. They do not fear the Lord, and they do not follow the statutes, or the rules, or the law, or the commandment that the Lord commanded the children of Jacob, whom he named Israel.

The Lord made a covenant with them, and commanded them, You shall not fear other gods, or bow yourselves to them, or serve them, or sacrifice to them, but you shall fear the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt with great power, and with an outstretched arm.

[5 : 32] You shall bow yourselves to him, and to him you shall sacrifice. And the statutes and the rules, and the law and the commandment that he wrote for you, you shall always be careful to do.

You shall not fear other gods, and you shall not forget the covenant that I have made with you. You shall not fear other gods, but you shall fear the Lord your God, and he will deliver you out of the hand of all your enemies.

However they would not listen, but they did according to their former manner. So these nations feared the Lord and also served their carved images. Their children did likewise, and their children's children, as their fathers did, so they do to this day.

2 Kings chapter 17 is the death and the autopsy of the northern kingdom of Israel. A nation that did not depart from the ways of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, discovers the place to which those ways finally lead.

Although Judah is not here taken into exile, they do not escape the condemnation. Judah has followed Israel in its ways. A number of the sins for which Israel is drowned in the abyss of exile are sins of which Judah is no less guilty.

[6 : 38] The indictment of Israel serves as a powerful warning for the southern kingdom. As its sister, the northern kingdom, being taken into exile, is a warning about its own potential fate if it does not repent.

Especially under Ahaz, Judah is walking in the same direction, stepping towards that precipice that Israel has just fallen over. Indeed, Judah's doom has already been determined.

It's just going to be a longer time until they get there. Israel here loses everything. It loses its land, it loses its national life, its peoplehood, and the favour and the special presence of the Lord.

Uprooted by the king of Assyria, they will be scattered and lost. Unless they hold fast to the word of the Lord, they lose their identity entirely. Israel was defined by the covenant of their liberation at Sinai.

They were defined by the land that gave them a common rootedness. And at the very heart of it all, they were defined by common worship, by the worship of the Lord their God, who had brought them out of Egypt and brought them into the land.

[7 : 38] He had formed that covenant with them. However, when they reject the covenant and when they reject the true worship of the Lord, everything else will start to unravel. The nation is divided in two after Solomon.

Jeroboam leads the northern kingdom into idolatry. And as they proceeded down that path, they gradually lost the things that made them distinct in the first place until they are indistinguishable from the nations and are finally scattered among them, like the ashes of a once great people that have ceased to exist.

Hosea is the last king of Israel. He comes to power through a conspiracy against Pekah, the son of Ramaliah. And there is a switch under him in the foreign policy towards Assyria.

He becomes the vassal of Assyria. Under Pekah, the son of Ramaliah, Israel had tried to form an anti-Assyrian coalition with Syria and other nations in the region. They had besieged Jerusalem, intending to establish a puppet king and to force Judah to join the anti-Assyrian coalition.

That plan had come to nothing and Hosea had conspired against Pekah and taken the throne in his place. Hosea's intention was to reverse this policy towards Assyria. However, a little while into his reign, he changes his mind and turns to Egypt for aid against Assyria.

[8 : 50] Israel and Judah were caught between kingdoms in the north and the south, great empires and powers. The region of Israel and Judah and the nations surrounding them was like the centre of a chessboard.

The back-ranked powers of Assyria and Egypt lay behind them. While manipulated by these great powers, the kingdoms in between fought like pawns in the middle of the board. After Israel stops giving tribute to Assyria and turns to Egypt, Assyria invades the land and comes to Samaria besieging it for three years.

It finally falls, Israel is deported and is then lost in exile. Hosea and Israel are largely lost in captivity. This will not be the case with Judah. Judah will be spared in part on account of the Davidic king and also as they looked to the words of the prophets.

Hosea's name is the same as Joshua's original name as we see in Numbers chapter 13. There is a sort of irony here. Israel was brought into the land under Hosea and now it is removed under Hosea.

Verses 7-23 are the autopsy report for Israel. It begins with a summary statement in verses 7-8. They sinned against the Lord who brought them out in the Exodus.

[9 : 59] They served other gods and they walked in the customs of the nations and their wicked kings. They reject the God who has made them his own. They violate the covenant especially the core commandments.

Have no other gods beside the Lord. They should not worship the Lord their God with graven images and they should not bear the name of the Lord in vain. Yet they had done all of these things.

They had rejected God for other gods. They had served God through idols and then they had borne the name of the Lord in a way that caused the name of the Lord to be blasphemed among the nations.

Not only did they reject the Lord they followed the practices of the nations the very practices for which the other nations were cast out. Israel was supposed to be distinct from the Canaanites.

In Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 9-14 they are warned against following in the pattern of the nations. When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations.

[10 : 57] There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead.

For whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord and because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out before you. You shall be blameless before the Lord your God. For these nations which you are about to dispossess listen to fortune tellers and to diviners but as for you the Lord your God has not allowed you to do this.

They have also walked in the ways of their wicked kings Jeroboam in particular. More specific sins of Israel are given in detail in verses 9 to 12 all these sins of idolatry all these sins in which they walked in the ways of the Canaanites that had preceded them.

Throughout the book of Kings there is an emphasis upon the ministry of the prophets. God gives warning after warning but Israel stubbornly refused to listen. Far from being distinct from the Canaanites that had preceded them they follow in their ways and have committed all of their sins.

The two golden calves in Bethel and Dan established by Jeroboam following the pattern of the rebellion of Israel at Sinai sets the course for what follows. Israelite king after Israelite king does not depart from the ways of Jeroboam the son of Nebat the ways in which he caused Israel to sin and this all provokes the Lord to anger.

[12 : 24] The gross ingratitude and the brazen offense of Israel's sin should be apparent from these verses. The Lord rejects the descendants of Israel more generally in verse 20. Judah's being left is only temporary.

Both nations will be given over to plunderers. If we are to understand the cause of death we look back to the event of Jeroboam. Jeroboam's sin is the key event. One man's sin set the destiny of the nation once he had established that pattern Israel did not depart from it.

Once the path had been set they never left it. This should be contrasted with their attitude to the way of the Lord which they abandoned so quickly. Peter Lighthouse notes some of the poetic justice.

The narrator shows that there is an eye for eye justice in God's dealings with his people. Israel never turns away from their sin so Yahweh turns away his people.

Israel rejects Yahweh's statutes and covenant so Yahweh rejects it. Yahweh has the Canaanites carried away to exile and he does the same with the Israelites who follow Canaanite customs.

[13 : 28] Israel cannot complain against the justice of Yahweh and has no grounds for suggesting that he is unfaithful to his covenant. Israel's breach of covenant is evident in the ten violations listed in chapter 17 verses 15 to 17 numerically matching the ten words of Moses that summarise the original covenant in which Israel receives the land.

The book of Kings is theodicy justifying God's ways with Israel by showing that Israel and Judah both sinned in the face of Yahweh's persistent mercy and repeated warnings.

As Israel is removed from the land and scattered among the nations there is the strange situation of exiles being brought in. In the book of Leviticus the land is described as if it had a life of its own in executing the covenant a witness of the covenant and of the word of the Lord that enacts sanctions against those who are rebellious.

And here the land and its creatures rise up against the new inhabitants. Lions eat them in judgment. Lions have been used to judge unfaithful persons on a couple of earlier occasions in the books of the kings.

There are also the bears that eat the 42 lads in chapter 2 of 2 Kings. As the lions afflict the new inhabitants they figure that it must be a failure in worship. They see the Lord as a local or a regional deity that must be appeased.

[14 : 44] Ironically they look to a priest from the deported Israelites to teach them how to be faithful to the Lord. This priest is set up at Bethel a place of great sin and idolatry. The new inhabitants are syncretists like Israel had been.

They worship the Lord but alongside their own gods in the shrines of the high places. They make priests from all the people rather than just from the Levites. They're like Israel but now the nation has reverted to a sort of pre-conquest condition.

Brought in under Hoshea and brought out under Hoshea it is as if the whole history of Israel had been thrown into a reverse and little evidence now remains that they had ever inhabited the land.

All of this comes down to their failure to remember the word of the Lord and their failure to listen. The book of Deuteronomy given just before they were entering into the land had emphasized these two things their need to remember and their need to listen.

If they do not remember the word of the Lord if they do not learn the lessons of the wilderness if they do not learn the works of the Lord in the Exodus they will suffer all the curses of the covenant and will ultimately be expelled from the land.

[15 : 50] This is what happens to Israel and it is a sign of what will later happen to Judah. A question to consider Jeroboam and his sins set the course for the entire history of the nation of Israel.

Why was Jeroboam's sin so decisive for its course?