

Epilogue and Prologue

As the people of Solomon's kingdom began to feel the burden of his greatness - conscription, forced labour and requisitioning - resentments and thoughts of rebellion arose. Yahweh did not enslave and burden his subjects. If he had wanted them to sweat for taskmasters, he might have persuaded them to remain submissive and dutiful in Egypt. But Solomon's rule, though so clearly and richly blessed by Yahweh, had become a burden and it did not continue unopposed. An Ephraimite named Jeroboam, a capable young man of good ancestry, had been put in charge of all the forced labour from the central area of Israel, and a certain prophet of Yahweh, Ahijah, foresaw an even greater future for him. This prophet, from the ancient shrine of Shiloh, met him on the road one day as he travelled out of Jerusalem.

Ahijah was wearing a new cloak, which he took and tore into twelve strips, saying to Jeroboam: "Take ten strips for yourself, for Yahweh the God of Israel says 'I am going to tear the kingdom from Solomon's hand and give ten tribes to you. He shall keep one tribe for the sake of my servant David, and for the sake of Jerusalem, the city I have chosen.'" (IK 11: 29-32)

It was a bold and dangerous act, the voice of a prophet raised to oppose the king. In this challenging gesture the messenger from Shiloh had called into question again the power and authority of the monarchy. The incredible success of David and the enormous prestige of his son Solomon seemed to have settled forever that the king ruled Israel, by Yahweh's choice. But just as God had remained with Samuel and he had not lost his authority to oppose and censure Saul; and just as the prophet Nathan was a voice for Yahweh in David's time, judging and rebuking even him; so now, under Solomon, there was a voice to speak with an authority that challenged even the king's. Yahweh was still unexpectedly active in Israel, and now he spoke, suddenly, on a country road out of Jerusalem.

There was danger in what the prophet did, for he acted in the name of Yahweh, who had often led his people into bold and dangerous ventures. Though they were "alone" in the open country, Jeroboam must have had his servants and bodyguard with him - the master in charge of conscription did not travel about literally alone - and it was not surprising that word got back to Solomon. Jeroboam had to flee for his life to Egypt, and wait there for his day, under Pharaoh's protection.

Like many foretellings, the prophet's word was not for immediate and unqualified fulfilment. In fact, Solomon was too strong to be shaken or even threatened by rebels. But the prophet had declared Yahweh's intention and God himself who had so long and painstakingly built up the nation of Israel was about to tear it apart. The very might and prosperity that had fulfilled all Israel's hopes now threatened to weigh down like a crushing burden on her. The kingdom was too great, and Yahweh would tear

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his own work in two, rather than let the proud kings of an all too mighty Israel enslave their own people.

After reigning forty years Solomon at last "slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the citadel of David his father."¹ His son Rehoboam succeeded him. Accepted at once by Judah, he was secure in Jerusalem, but the allegiance of the rest of Israel was not automatic. An assembly was called at Shechem, Israel's traditional meeting place, and there Rehoboam met the northern tribes to hear their conditions. They wanted changes and a new style of rule from Jerusalem: "Lighten your father's harsh tyranny now, and the burdens he laid upon us, and we will serve you."²

Rehoboam took three days considering the matter. Senior officials from his father's day advised him to make concessions. He should bow to the people now, to win them. These were experienced men, who knew how long and carefully David had cultivated Israel's love and how much Solomon owed his success to their loyalty to David. Solomon had entered his reign on the crest of national enthusiasm for his father's house, but he had squandered his popularity and Rehoboam would have to woo and win the Israelites again.

However, this king was of a new breed, and knew nothing of winning a people's trust. The warrior ways of his ancestors were ancient history to him, and his upbringing in the palace had not included chasing donkeys or herding sheep. He was an arrogant young man who thought that the power and the rights of rule were his to insist upon and that he should dominate his subjects by an unflinching assertion of authority. His was the way of powerful kings, of emperors with armies to enforce obedience; it was not Yahweh's. Spurred on by courtiers as young and foolish as himself, he rejected the very idea of accommodation. Force, he imagined, would be stronger and quicker than the building of personal trust; fearless and prompt self-assertion would get their submission.

My father made you bear a heavy burden, but I will make it heavier still. My father beat you with whips; I am going to beat you with loaded scourges."
(IK 12: 14)

His arrogance did not impress Israel but only stiffened their resistance. They were ready to reject the whole dynasty of David, and little though he realised it, these negotiations had been Rehoboam's last chance. Israel would go its own way and let Judah keep its king.

What share have we in David?
We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse.
To your tents, Israel!
Henceforth, look after your own house, David!"
(IK 12: 16)

¹ IK 11:43 ² IK 12: 4

Rehoboam sent Adoram, the master in charge of forced labour, to restore authority, but Adoram's men were over-powered, and he was stoned to death. Rehoboam beat a hasty retreat to Jerusalem, while the northern tribes summoned Jeroboam to the assembly. Proclaiming him King of Israel, they divided the kingdom - no longer one nation, but the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

Rehoboam, rallying his subjects in Judah and such of the Benjaminites as remained loyal to him, prepared for a civil war that would have been disastrous to all. But again Yahweh spoke, through one of his prophets: "Do not go to war against your brothers, the sons of Israel; let everyone go home, for what has happened is my doing."¹

Apparently, the king was wise enough to see that he had lost, and accepted the word of the prophet as Yahweh's own pronouncement. Israel and Judah went their separate ways. Jeroboam made Shechem his first capital, and set up the old shrine city of Bethel as a new religious centre for the northern kingdom. Yahweh had indeed, and permanently, split the kingdom that he had created.

It was the end of David's empire, but a beginning, too, for the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Precisely because it was Yahweh's doing, his punishment and the work of his anger, it was still part of their relationship with him. It was an opening into the future, a beginning of all that Yahweh might still have it in mind to do for them. The dividing of the kingdom under Rehoboam is our epilogue to the story of the Warrior God and his exploits for Israel, but it is the prologue, too, to the rest of the history.

Through the prophet, Yahweh had sent word to the king: "What has happened is my doing." Let that be his final word on all the history we have followed in this book. It is all Yahweh's doing, the work of his sovereign love, which, having once intervened, is now committed to his people, and so does not end here. Three hundred years have passed, and much has happened, and much will yet happen, and over it all Yahweh says: "What has happened is my doing."

¹ IK 12:24