



Good News
Bible Reading Program

A free educational service provided by the United Church of God, *an International Association*

— January 2003 —

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
1 Jan	Solomon's prayer of dedication	1 Kings 8:22-53; 2 Chronicles 6:12-42
2 Jan	Temple dedication completed	2 Chronicles 7:1-10; 1 Kings 8:54-66
3 Jan	God appears to Solomon a second time	2 Chronicles 7:11-22; 1 Kings 9:1-9
4 Jan	Gift exchange between Solomon and Hiram; Solomon's other works	2 Chronicles 8; 1 Kings 9:10-28
5 Jan	The Queen of Sheba praises Solomon's wisdom; Solomon's wealth and economic power	1 Kings 10; 2 Chronicles 9:1-28; 2 Chronicles 1:14-17
6 Jan	Solomon turns from God; Adversaries raised up	1 Kings 11:1-25
7 Jan	Initial rebellion of Jeroboam; Ahijah's prophecy to Jeroboam; Death of Solomon	1 Kings 11:26-43; 2 Chronicles 9:29-31
8 Jan	Rehoboam loses the northern tribes to Jeroboam	1 Kings 12:1-24; 2 Chronicles 10:1-11.4
9 Jan	Jeroboam's idolatry	1 Kings 12:25-33; 2 Chronicles 11:13-17
10 Jan	Man of God's message and death	1 Kings 13
11 Jan	Ahijah prophesies judgment on Jeroboam; Rehoboam fortifies his kingdom; Family of Rehoboam	1 Kings 14:1-18; 2 Chronicles 11:5-12, 18-23
12 Jan	Reign of Rehoboam; Egypt attacks Judah	2 Chronicles 12; 1 Kings 14:21-31
13 Jan	Abijam king of Judah	1 Kings 15:1-8; 2 Chronicles 13
14 Jan	Asa king of Judah; Death of Jeroboam; Asa's reign; Nadab and Baasha, kings of Israel	2 Chronicles 14:1-8; 1 Kings 14:19-20; 15:9-11, 25-34
15 Jan	Ethiopian army vanquished; Asa's reforms	2 Chronicles 14:9-15:19; 1 Kings 15:12-15
16 Jan	Asa's treaty with Syria against Baasha; Messages from Hanani to Asa and Baasha	2 Chronicles 16:1-10; 1 Kings 15:16-22; 16:1-7
17 Jan	Elah, Zimri, Omri and Ahab, kings of Israel; Disease and death of Asa	1 Kings 16:8-34; 15:23-24; 2 Chronicles 16:11-14
18 Jan	Jehoshaphat king of Judah	2 Chronicles 17; 1 Kings 22:41-44; 2 Chronicles 20:31-33
19 Jan	Elijah proclaims drought; Elijah and the widow	1 Kings 17
20 Jan	Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal	1 Kings 18:1-40
21 Jan	Drought ends; Elijah flees from Jezebel; God meets him at Mount Sinai; Elisha follows Elijah	1 Kings 18:41-19:21
22 Jan	Ahab defeats the Syrians	1 Kings 20:1-22
23 Jan	Ahab defeats the Syrians again; Makes treaty	1 Kings 20:23-43

	with Ben-Hadad	
24 Jan	Naboth murdered for his vineyard	1 Kings 21
25 Jan	Micaiah's warning	1 Kings 22:1-28; 2 Chronicles 18:1-27
26 Jan	Death of Ahab; Ahaziah king of Israel; Jehoshaphat rebuked; Jehoshaphat's reforms	1 Kings 22:29-40, 51-53; 2 Chronicles 18:28-19:11
27 Jan	Ammonites, Moabites and Edomites vanquished	2 Chronicles 20:1-30
28 Jan	Jehoshaphat allies with Ahaziah; Judgment on Ahaziah	2 Chronicles 20:34-37; 1 Kings 22:45-49; 2 Kings 1; 3:1-3
29 Jan	Elijah's ascension; Elisha performs miracles	2 Kings 2
30 Jan	War against Moab	2 Kings 3:4-27
31 Jan	Elisha and the widow's oil; The Shunammite woman bears a son; Additional miracles	2 Kings 4:1-17, 38-44

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Highlights to Think About from This Month's Reading

Solomon's Prayer of Dedication (1 Kings 8:22-53; 2 Chronicles 6:12-42) January 1

Solomon's prayer of dedication is interesting in many respects. In 2 Chronicles 6:12-17 Solomon brings up God's promise to David and asks for its fulfillment. This passage is used by some to declare that the promise of God to David in 2 Samuel 7 is conditional, with gainsayers noting that Solomon said, "You shall not fail to have a man sit before Me on the throne of Israel, *only if* your sons take heed to their way, that they walk in My law as you have walked before Me" (verse 16). The *only if*, it is asserted, makes it conditional. And since David's descendants did not continue to walk in his ways, God was not bound to fulfill the promise of an enduring dynasty (except, they further assert, through Christ, David's "greater son").

But this is simply not so. This phrase—*only if*—is a Hebraism, that is, a figure of speech that cannot be literally translated into another language and still retain its meaning. In Hebrew, the phrase *only if* conveys the general meaning "but be certain that," and is intended to convey the strongest of affirmations, injunctions or prohibitions. It does not convey qualification.

Solomon's dedicatory prayer makes repeated mention of praying "toward this place," a clear intimation that the temple was to become the center of a world religion—that is, the true religion God gave was to become worldwide. In his prayer, Solomon anticipates both a worldwide dispersal of Israelites (whether through commerce, colonization or captivity) and a turning of the gentiles to the worship of God. Whether he understood the full implications of his words is unclear, but God certainly inspired him with prophetic thoughts. Specific subjects include answering prayers for forgiveness, justice, deliverance from captivity and military attack, mercy while in captivity, rain and good harvests, respite from plagues and agricultural devastation, and the prayers of the gentiles made in the temple (implying gentile converts to the true religion). In all these matters, Solomon beseeches God to hear and answer.

But Solomon does not portray God as a sort of cosmic genie, duty-bound to grant wishes upon request. Before mentioning the various kinds of things that people would pray for, Solomon soberly conditions the minds of his hearers as to exactly *who* will dwell within this magnificent temple. God is a God of kept promises given freely in grace, not because He is under compulsion to do so. And He is a God who cannot be confined to a building, no matter how magnificent it is. God dwells in heaven and is *not* man's creation! God is supreme and cannot be bound. In short, *God is sovereign*, and every petitioner must have an acute awareness of his need for God's mercy, grace and providence.

Temple Dedication Completed (2 Chronicles 7:1-10; 1 Kings 8:54-66) January 2

Solomon's prayer was answered in the most miraculous of ways—a bolt of fire fell from heaven and consumed the sacrifices on the altar. Also, "the glory of the LORD filled the temple" (2 Chronicles 7:1)—the awesome radiant cloud of God's presence. Thereupon the king and the elders of Israel dedicated the temple by offering sacrifices in abundance and with great joy. Following the initial days of dedication came the Feast of Tabernacles and the Eighth Day. And Solomon "sent the people away to their tents, joyful and glad of heart for the good that the LORD had done for David, for Solomon, and for His people Israel." This event marks one of the few times that Israel was in harmony with God, joyful in their portion and grateful to their God.

God Appears to Solomon Again (2 Chronicles 7:11-22; 1 Kings 9:1-9) January 3

First Kings 9 relates that *after* Solomon had completed all his building projects—the temple, Solomon's residence, the queen's residence and the buildings of the national government—God appeared to him a second time. This seems to be indicated in 2 Chronicles 7:11-12 as well. Yet 1 Kings 9:10 appears to state that 20 years marked the completion of the building projects, a timing factor not mentioned in 2 Chronicles. And if that is what 1 Kings 9:10 is indicating, then, since Solomon began building the temple in the fourth year of his reign, the appearance of God would have occurred in his 24th year as king.

God appeared and made promises to Solomon. Once again, these promises are closely related to the promise God made to David in 2 Samuel 7. And, once again, some argue that the words of God to Solomon make His promise to David conditional. But they do not—the promise to David was and remains unconditional. God told Solomon that He had accepted his prayer, and that He would hear the prayers of Israel made toward the temple, and show mercy and forgiveness when His people

repented. Then God added, “As for *you*...” (2 Chronicles 7:17), speaking of Solomon, *not* David. Now, what did God promise *Solomon*?

God promised that *if* he remained faithful, God would establish *his*—*Solomon’s*—throne forever, as He had promised David. The promise to David was unconditional—one of his descendants would sit on a throne ruling over the children of Israel in every generation. But now God extends to Solomon the opportunity to ensure that this descendant would *also* be a descendant of Solomon. If Solomon sinned, then the punishment would be the destruction of the *kingdom*, not an immediate end to the dynasty of Solomon. If Solomon sinned, Israel would be taken from the land as a captive people. But God did not say that *at the time Israel was taken captive* Solomon’s throne would also cease. God promised that the *kingdom* would be destroyed. Whether Solomon’s dynasty would be extinguished at that time too was not stated. In point of fact, the Bible *later* reveals that Solomon’s dynasty *will* end at Christ’s second coming to take the throne (as Christ, by His mother, was a descendant of David through David’s son Nathan, not Solomon). But until then, Solomon’s dynasty would continue—and does so today (see “The Throne of Britain: Its Biblical Origin and Future” at www.ucg.org/brp/materials).

The beautiful and profound wording of 2 Chronicles 7:14 has made it one of the most well-known Bible verses to those who look to Scripture for inspiration and guidance in prayer.

Solomon’s Other Works (2 Chronicles 8; 1 Kings 9:10-28)

January 4

Solomon’s other works consisted largely of building projects in various cities, securing Israel’s frontiers and building an institutionalized army. He seized Hamath Zobah, a region on Israel’s northeast border containing two cities, Hamath and Zobah, the former of which had formerly been friendly with David but now, given its association with Zobah, had probably switched allegiance. He built Tadmor in the wilderness (called by the Romans Palmyra) in a fertile oasis just to the southeast of Zobah. He built Hazor in northern Israel upon the high ground overlooking Lake Merom. He rebuilt Gezer in Ephraim, which had been attacked and burned by Pharaoh, its Canaanite inhabitants exterminated, and then given to his daughter as a gift upon her marriage to Solomon. He rebuilt upper and lower Beth Horon, two cities located in Ephraim and separated by about two miles. He refortified Baalath in Dan. And he rebuilt or fortified Megiddo, which occupied a strategic position on the Plain of Esdraelon on the border of Issachar and Mannaseh. As may be seen from the list of localities, Solomon directed his attention to securing Israel’s northern borders. This is also evidence that tends to confirm our understanding of Solomon’s marriage with the daughter of Pharaoh as an alliance with Egypt to diminish or eliminate a threat from Israel’s south.

In addition, Solomon built the Millo, apparently a landfill between Mount Zion and Mount Moriah, thereby reducing the valley between the two prominences. And he greatly extended the wall of Jerusalem, finally fully enclosing both the lower city and the upper city.

As is well known, Israel did not exterminate all the gentile inhabitants of the land when Joshua brought Israel across Jordan. These people continued to live in the land. Solomon conscripted these peoples into forced labor for his many building projects.

Additionally, Solomon brought the daughter of Pharaoh into her new residence. Formerly she had dwelt in the lower city of Jerusalem, but not in the house of David for, since the Ark of the Covenant had been there, Solomon felt that this gentile woman’s presence in a place hallowed by the ark would have been unacceptable. This is evidence that the daughter of Pharaoh was not fully converted to the worship of God, otherwise she would have been esteemed an Israelite and able to partake of all the privileges of an Israelite. Her presence would not have been defiling.

Solomon also installed the system of worship that David had defined for the temple. The priesthood served by courses assigned to the major houses of the sons of Aaron. The proper sacrifices were offered on all the days observed by Israel—weekly Sabbaths, monthly new moons, and annual feasts. Thus was everything set in its place for the continual and orderly worship of God in His temple.

The final record in this section concerns the ports of Ezion Geber near Elath on Israel’s extreme southeastern border upon the “Red Sea”—actually the Gulf of Aqaba, a “finger” of the Red Sea. Here a fleet of ships was built and manned under a joint venture between Solomon and Hiram. This southern seaport would serve as Israel’s major port of entry and the point of departure for Ophir (the location of which is still in dispute). Such southern trade was extremely lucrative, and the fact that the Phoenician Hiram, king of Tyre, was engaged with Solomon at this port far removed from Tyre is one more piece of evidence that Israel was far from a landlocked little country notable

only for its preoccupation with monotheism, as some scholars habitually picture it. Israel was in alliance with the Phoenicians, and the worldwide trading empire we know as the Phoenician Empire was at that time actually an Israelite-Phoenician union.

Interestingly, as pointed out previously in the Bible Reading Program comments on Exodus 13:17–14:30, the Hebrew term translated “Red Sea” in verse 26 is *Yam Suf* (supposedly literally “Sea of Reeds”)—the same name given in the book of Exodus to the body of water that Moses and the Israelites crossed. The fact that a finger of the Red Sea could bear this name disproves the idea taught by many that *Yam Suf* must refer to a swamp or marshy lake with reed plants like cattails, rushes and papyrus. Evidently, *Yam Suf* can also mean “Sea of Seaweed,” as *suf* obviously means seaweed in Jonah 2:5.

Solomon’s Wisdom and Wealth

(1 Kings 10; 2 Chronicles 9:1-28; 2 Chronicles 1:14-17)

January 5

Here we have the famous visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon’s court. Sheba was located in what is today the southwestern corner of Saudi Arabia, roughly in the region occupied by Yemen, but also possibly occupying territory on the adjacent African coast in Ethiopia as reported in Ethiopian tradition. The ancients called the area of Yemen *Arabia Felix*, “Happy Arabia,” because of its healthful climate and its riches in gold, incense, precious stones and spices. That the Queen of Sheba would hear of Solomon is evidence of the briskness of trade between Sheba and Israel, much of which was doubtless carried on through Solomon’s southern fleet. Mention of the “ships of Hiram, which brought gold from Ophir” (1 Kings 10:11), has been taken to indicate that the fabled land was located on Africa’s eastern coast. There *is* a phonetic similarity between Ophir and Africa. Others have speculated that it was further south—in southern Africa—while still others have identified it with India or even the Americas (in the latter case noting a similarity between the words Ophir and Pirua, the first Incan dynasty from which the country of Peru ultimately derives its name).

The vast wealth of Solomon is attributed to his far-flung trading empire. Not only did wealth pour in from the eastern desert traders, the Arabian traders and the governors of subject satellite nations, but on top of that Solomon’s annual inflow of gold bullion was 666 talents (more than 125,000 pounds, with a current value of more than U.S.\$500 million). Where did Solomon get all this gold? Ophir was a major source, but so was Tarshish, a Phoenician port in southern Spain. It was to this western port that Jonah was trying to escape when he set sail on a ship from Joppa.

This section of Scripture also notes that Solomon obtained horses and chariots from Egypt and other places. Again, this fact points to an amicable if not military alliance between Egypt and Israel, for chariots were the high-tech weaponry of the day. No doubt the alliance with Israel provided Egypt with a strong and secure ally to the north, well able to prevent incursions into Egypt from Syria and Mesopotamia. But militarizing Israel in this way was contrary to God’s will—for, as He decreed through Moses in Deuteronomy 17:16-17, Israel’s king was not to multiply horses (i.e., an army) nor wives (i.e., a harem, the tokens of alliances with foreign nations), nor silver and gold to himself. Though Solomon did all three, God was patient and gave him space to repent. The repentance, however, never came—unless the book of Ecclesiastes was written after a very late repentance, as many speculate.

Solomon’s Heart Turns From God (1 Kings 11:1-25)

January 6

For all his wisdom, for all his marvelous insight, for all his education, Solomon drifted away from God. Wisdom is good, and much to be desired, but Solomon never learned (or learned much too late if Ecclesiastes was his end-of-life reflection) that there is one thing that is far above wisdom and much more to be desired than all the wealth that Solomon’s wisdom brought him—a faithful heart yielding to the commands of God. When God gives gifts to people, He allows those people the choice of whether to use them or not. Every Christian can either use or not use the gift of the Holy Spirit. That is why the apostle Paul admonished the evangelist Timothy to “stir up the gift that is in you” (1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6)—and why he admonishes all Christians not to stifle or suppress that gift (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

First Kings 11 begins by succinctly stating the cause of Solomon’s idolatry: “But King Solomon loved many foreign women, as well as the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites.... He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart.” As we read earlier, many of Solomon’s wives and concubines were undoubtedly the result of foreign alliances, as was the custom of the day. God knew these customs, and He commanded Israel’s kings not to engage in them. While certain alliances were

apparently permitted (with the understanding that God was the true source of security), multiple wives for the king as a consequence of the alliances were not. Nor were marriages to women of peoples God had expressly forbidden. Solomon, then, disobeyed—even though he most likely knew of these prohibitions (compare Deuteronomy 17:18-20; 7:1-4).

It is explicitly stated that Solomon turned away from God “when he was old” (1 Kings 11:4). Of course, he couldn’t have been *that* old, as he apparently didn’t reach the age of 60. *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary* notes regarding Solomon’s apostasy in verse 4, “He could not have been more than fifty.” Still, a man’s vitality naturally diminishes with age. No doubt Solomon’s wives, having never given up their gods, continually pressured him concerning their religion and how certain forms of worship were required of them. Although Solomon penned Proverbs 27:15-16, he likely became a victim of its dynamics. And no doubt this idolatry came upon him by degrees, starting small and increasing over time. Perhaps he first allowed his wives to possess small images. Gradually, perhaps, the idols became bigger, required shrines and demanded rites and ritual. However it happened, it surely did not happen all at once. Sin usually increases through neglect and compromise over time. Solomon’s example should serve as instruction for God’s people today to not compromise with His revealed ways and to shun intermarriage with anyone who is not spiritually likeminded (see 2 Corinthians 6:11-18; 1 Corinthians 7:39).

The result of Solomon’s compromise and idolatry was that ultimately Israel would be split into two rival kingdoms. Solomon’s son would not be the king of a wealthy nation with worldwide trading interests, but the potentate of a small kingdom with greatly reduced wealth and little power. Even before the rupture of the kingdom, God allowed the peace and security Solomon had inherited, nurtured and enjoyed to be taken away by an increasing number of adversaries and unfaithful allies. Turning away from the simple and plain commands of God never results in greater peace and happiness, but always in frustrating and persistent problems that rob us of the life and peace God wants us to enjoy.

Jeroboam and the Beginning of Division

(1 Kings 11:26-43; 2 Chronicles 9:29-31)

January 7

The consequences of Solomon’s idolatry continued to accumulate. Jeroboam was an industrious soldier who came to Solomon’s attention. Seeing his diligence, Solomon appointed Jeroboam to oversee the workforce of the house of Joseph. Then the word of the Lord came to the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite. Ahijah met Jeroboam and declared that God would rend the kingdom—10 tribes—away from Solomon’s son and give it to him instead, and he informed Jeroboam that all this would happen because of Solomon’s idolatry.

Word of this transaction reached Solomon, and his reaction shows just how far from his wisdom Solomon had fallen: he tried to have Jeroboam murdered. What folly! If God has appointed a thing to happen, can a mere man, even one as intelligent and powerful as Solomon, frustrate the plans of the Almighty? Nevertheless, Solomon foolishly thought that he could end the Lord’s plan by dispensing with Jeroboam.

Solomon did have good reason to fear Jeroboam, though. Jeroboam was a “mighty man of valor” (an accomplished soldier) and very industrious—two qualities that make for a strong leader. But more importantly, Jeroboam was an Ephraimite who, as a result of his position managing the Ephraimite workforce, had no doubt cultivated relationships with the wealthy and powerful of that tribe. Given the longstanding rivalry between Ephraim and Judah (Solomon’s tribe), Solomon had every reason to view Jeroboam as a very potent rival to his throne. Indeed, there was more than mere rivalry between Ephraim and Judah. Even during David’s kingdom, the northern tribes of “Israel” were cautious and reluctant about accepting a king from Judah. Solomon’s hold on the northern tribes was thus perhaps somewhat tenuous anyway. They were probably willing to assert their independence from Judah any time they no longer liked the political arrangement, and Solomon would surely have been well aware of this.

That Jeroboam was able to flee to Egypt for protection also implies that the alliance Solomon had forged with Egypt through his marriage to the daughter of Pharaoh was now either failing or already defunct. The Pharaoh gave Jeroboam protection in the hopes of allying Jeroboam to Egypt. Thus, at the end of Solomon’s life we see foreign enemies in the north, southeast and south, and a rival to the throne being given protection by the powerful and influential ruler of Egypt.

In Ahijah’s declaration, we see that “the kingdom” was to be taken from Solomon and given to Jeroboam. “The kingdom” is further defined as “ten tribes.” Why is this? Solomon’s son Rehoboam

would naturally retain leadership of his own tribe, Judah. But as a concession for David's sake, God allowed one *other* tribe, Benjamin, to be subject to Solomon's son as well. There is good reason for this. When David became king of all Israel, he moved his capital from Hebron, the Judahite capital, to Jerusalem, a city lying just within Benjamite territory but administered by Judah. This was as a concession to the northern tribes. By moving to Jerusalem, David became less "Jewish," so to speak, and more "Israelite," and therefore more acceptable to the northerners. If Rehoboam had lost *all* the other tribes—including Benjamin—he, as a Judahite, would likely have been forced back to Hebron at some point, probably under Israelite pressure, abandoning Jerusalem and the temple. By allowing Solomon's son to continue to reign over Benjamin, God continued a powerful geographical motivation to keep Jerusalem as the center of Judah's government and the seat of God's worship.

Rehoboam Loses the Kingdom (1 Kings 12:1-24; 2 Chronicles 10:1-11:4) January 8

Now the terrible consequences of Solomon's idolatry will begin to unfold for the entire people of Israel. Rehoboam goes to Shechem for his coronation. Prior to the coronation, however, the people of Israel had called Jeroboam back from Egypt, intending to make him their spokesman. Solomon's great building plans had required heavy taxes and forced labor, though some of the people were becoming wealthy through the trading empire Solomon had built (1 Samuel 8:11-18; 1 Kings 4:7; 9:15). With the accession of a new king, the people sought relief from the taxation.

That this was a well-orchestrated effort at taxation reform is indicated by the people's united activity and their selection of Jeroboam as spokesman. It also indicates that the house of Ephraim was likely the main force behind the united effort. Israel's kings were limited, constitutional monarchs, Samuel having set down in a written document the rights and responsibilities of the king according to God's law (1 Samuel 10:25; compare Deuteronomy 17:14-20). Absolute monarchs, by contrast, have no such limits.

Rehoboam proved himself to be a stubborn and foolish young man, which his father had worried over (see Ecclesiastes 2:18-19). His insensitivity to the request of his own people, and his apparent unawareness of the well-ordered petition brought by an Ephraimite in the land of Ephraim, showed him to be of dull discernment and unfeeling heart. That Shechem was the place where Israel had formerly bound themselves to God as their sole Sovereign (Joshua 24:23-25) also seems to have eluded the young heir to the throne. Rehoboam also seemed oblivious to the fact that all of Solomon's counselors, who were older and more mature than his less-experienced friends, advised him to reduce the heavy taxation—an indication that they too recognized the excesses of Solomon. Rehoboam was unable to recognize sound counsel when he heard it.

Indeed, the young man's judgment fell far short of the wisdom his father counseled in the book of Proverbs—and this despite the book's many appeals to "My son," i.e., to Rehoboam primarily. Yet really that should come as no surprise—since Solomon set such a bad example of not following it all himself. It may even be that Solomon was too distracted with his thousand wives and the administration of his kingdom to properly train Rehoboam for his future responsibility—so that the young man lacked a sound foundation for rulership. Furthermore, "the turn of events was from the LORD"—to bring about the divine punishment of Solomon that his heirs were to suffer (1 Kings 12:15).

The rebellion at Shechem was quickly followed by the anointing of Jeroboam as king of Israel. Rehoboam marshaled his troops, from Judah and Benjamin, to crush the rebellion, but a message from God forbade the contemplated assault, and Rehoboam relented.

Jeroboam's Idolatry (1 Kings 12:25-33; 2 Chronicles 11:13-17) January 9

Jeroboam set about securing his kingdom and decided to pursue a diabolical and disastrous strategy. Thinking that the people of Israel might change their minds and be persuaded to return to Rehoboam if they continued assembling for worship at Jerusalem during the feasts, Jeroboam decided the most practical and expedient course of action would be to change the religion in northern Israel and thereby keep the people away from Solomon's temple.

Accordingly, he created two golden calves and placed one in Dan and one in Bethel, meaning *House of God*. These locations were strategic. Dan was Israel's northernmost city, and thus would attract worshipers from those in the far north. Bethel was in Ephraim, near the southern border of Jeroboam's kingdom and not far from Jerusalem. Being along the main route to Jerusalem, Jeroboam's new worship center would attract those formerly accustomed to going to Jerusalem to worship. Why did Jeroboam choose calves as the primary symbols of his new religion? No doubt this was influenced by the time he had spent in Egypt—where bull worship had long been a prominent

feature of Egyptian religion. Variations of this worship, which also incorporated bulls and calves, were also popular in the nations around Israel and Judah.

Jeroboam was a practitioner of *syncretism*—blending of traditions, beliefs and elements from different religions with God’s true religion, which God strictly forbids (Deuteronomy 12:29-31). Some elements, such as priests, worship centers and religious festivals, to some degree imitated the worship system God had established. Yet Jeroboam added his own twists for his own ends and purposes. He palmed off his plans under the guise of making worship easier for Israel. Why have all Israel go to Jerusalem in the far south? Why not make the worship of God easier and establish two worship sites in Israel, making the trip far less cumbersome?

The New King James Version records Jeroboam’s proclamation as, “Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!” (1 Kings 12:28). But it could also be translated, “Here is your God, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt,” as the Hebrew *Elohim* can be translated as either “God” or “gods” and the verb in this case fits both plural and singular usage. Notice that in the account where Aaron was prodded into making the golden calf at Mount Sinai, the older King James translates Exodus 32:4 as “These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.” Yet the New King James renders this as “This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!” The NKJV translated it this way because there was only one calf at Sinai. So does the existence of *two* calves in 1 Kings 12 denote two gods? Not necessarily—for in paganism multiple images can represent the same deity. And that is most likely what Jeroboam meant. Just as the golden calf at Mount Sinai was made to represent “the LORD” (Exodus 32:4-5), so the *two* golden calves of Jeroboam were both made to represent the same God—again, the true God. Yet God saw the worship introduced by Jeroboam as worshiping *demons* (2 Chronicles 11:15; compare 1 Corinthians 10:20).

Notice some of Jeroboam’s other changes. He rejected the Levitical priesthood, replacing it with non-Levites who would attend to and administer the new religion (1 Kings 12:31). He “made priests of the lowest of people” (Green’s Literal Translation), those who were willing to make any religious compromise necessary. As a result, we find the added detail in 2 Chronicles 11 of the migration of faithful Levites from Israel to Judah. The stated reason given is their loss of position (verse 14). Nevertheless, the fact that they were thoroughly taught, trained and practiced in the law of God was surely a contributing factor to their devotion to remain true to God’s worship system and support the Davidic ruler, Rehoboam.

Jeroboam’s new religion, it should be pointed out, was not really all that new. He still worshiped God in name, but with his own changes. Idolatry was sanctioned, acceptable places for worship were changed and a new priesthood—one personally loyal to Jeroboam—was inaugurated. Jeroboam did not rush wholesale into apostasy, the worship of a foreign god. Instead he merely “made things a little easier” for Israel to “worship the God of Abraham.” Such gradual change is typically the pattern of apostasy—and we must always be on guard against it. This is not to say that we should never change or grow in understanding as God makes biblical truth clearer to us. We absolutely must. But we must be extremely careful to “prove all things” according to God’s Word and “hold fast” what we recognize to be His clearly revealed truth and will (1 Thessalonians 5:21, KJV).

The Bible makes it clear that Jeroboam bears heavy accountability for deliberately initiating a counterfeit religion and setting such an evil precedent for succeeding kings of Israel. Jeroboam remains infamous long after his death, Scripture repeatedly branding him as one who “made Israel sin” (2 Kings 10:31; 13:6; 14:24; 15:9, 18, 24). The Israelite kings Baasha, Zimri, Omri, Ahab and Ahaziah are all said to have “walked in the way of Jeroboam” (1 Kings 15:33-34; 16:19, 26, 31; 22:52). Jehoram “persisted in the sins of Jeroboam” (2 Kings 3:3). Jehu, Jehoash, Jeroboam II and Zechariah “did not depart from the sins of Jeroboam” (2 Kings 10:29; 13:11; 14:23-24; 15:8-9, 18). Jehoahaz “followed the sins of Jeroboam” (2 Kings 13:2). And note this stinging indictment: “Jeroboam drove Israel from following the LORD, and made them commit a great sin” (2 Kings 17:21).

The Man of God (1 Kings 13)

January 10

To rebuke Jeroboam for his abominable actions, God sent a prophet from Judah, unnamed in the scriptural account, with strict instructions to deliver God’s message, perform a certain sign and depart home to Judah without partaking of any food or drink. The unnamed prophet gave the warning, performed the sign and departed as instructed. Despite the personal effect of the sign upon Jeroboam, the king would not repent. How tragic and foolish! Jeroboam’s stubbornness would yield decades of

strife and, ultimately, the destruction of his dynasty and kingdom. We will later read of how Josiah, king of Judah around 300 years later (though prophesied here by name long before his birth), fulfilled this prophecy (2 Kings 23:15-18).

The Judean prophet departed according to the instruction of God, but he was soon pursued by an “old prophet” who dwelt in Bethel. We are not told who this old prophet was, nor if he was indeed a true prophet of God. His conduct does not betray him necessarily as a false prophet—since this one occasion is the only time we know that he lied. The old prophet’s deception of the Judean prophet underscores the vital need to follow God’s instructions precisely. The Judean prophet should have declined the old prophet’s invitation, saying that if the old prophet’s claim were true then he would wait until God revoked his original command in just as sure a manner as He had given it. But, foolishly, he allowed another to dissuade him from strictly following God’s commands.

The story of the Judean prophet contains the same theme as the story of Jeroboam’s new form of worship—namely, that any compromise with God’s instruction has consequences.

Ahijah’s Second Prophecy to Jeroboam; Rehoboam

Fortifies His Kingdom (1 Kings 14:1-18; 2 Chronicles 11:5-12, 18-23)

January 11

When Jeroboam’s son became ill, he sought out Ahijah, the prophet of God who had foretold Jeroboam’s rise to power. This shows that Jeroboam still knew which religious system was true even as he continued to maintain a false one. By an intended ruse Jeroboam sought to discover what would become of the child. But Ahijah was told by God what was happening and what he should say. Ahijah made it plain that Jeroboam had behaved wickedly and foolishly, and that not only would the child die but also the whole household of Jeroboam would be destroyed and, ultimately, the whole nation of Israel would be cast out of the land—demonstrating, as so many other examples do, that the consequences of sin are often far-reaching.

When Rehoboam returned to Jerusalem he did so as a petty monarch of a much smaller and largely powerless kingdom. He was immediately aware of his vulnerability. There was an unfriendly Israel on the north, a powerful former ally to the south (Egypt) who was now closely allied to Israel’s king, a number of hostile former vassal states to the south and east, and the resurgent Philistines on the west. And Rehoboam no longer had a worldwide trading empire. The future looked rather bleak.

Immediately he began to fortify his kingdom. He established a line of fortified towns along borders, securing water supplies and travel routes. The kingdom of Judah was basically transformed into a small fortress, though its king no doubt still trembled at the thought of attack. Had Egypt attacked, Judah could have been easily defeated. Had Israel attacked, the ferocious fight would have likely ended in Rehoboam’s defeat. Had the Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites or Edomites attacked, there could have been years of instability and constant dangers.

Rehoboam did have the foresight to deal wisely with his sons. Like his father Solomon before him, Rehoboam had acquired many wives and concubines. Whatever enjoyment he may have found in this situation was short-lived, though, when a crop of 28 sons matured. With such a large pool of potential heirs, nominating one was sure to antagonize the rest. To reduce the potential for intrigue and infighting, some of his sons were appointed to positions of authority in the fortified cities, while others remained in Jerusalem. In this way, Rehoboam could put some of the danger farther from the capital while keeping a close eye on those who remained nearby. To further control his sons, he sought many wives for them, thereby keeping them occupied with domestic concerns, distracted by sexual pursuits and enamored with the life of a mini-sheik (many wives being a sign of prosperity and social standing). When one stops to consider what Rehoboam was forced to do in trying to control the consequences of his own unrestrained desires, it is really quite sad.

Egypt Attacks Judah (2 Chronicles 12; 1 Kings 14:21-31)

January 12

As we saw earlier, Solomon likely married the daughter of Pharaoh as the seal of an alliance between Israel and Egypt. But we also saw that Egypt’s sheltering of Jeroboam probably indicated the end of that alliance. With the division of Israel and Judah, the little realm of Rehoboam became a tempting target for Egyptian expansion.

Despite his weakened position, Rehoboam foolishly departed from the Lord, and this within five years of assuming the throne. As a consequence, the protecting hand of God was withdrawn from Judah and the cruel hand of Egypt was stretched out against Rehoboam. The Egyptians undertook a massive assault against Judah and the prophet Shemaiah clearly explained the cause. Fortunately Rehoboam and Judah repented, saying, “The LORD is righteous” (2 Chronicles 12:6), thereby confessing they deserved punishment for their idolatry.

God saw this repentance and decided to lighten—not remove—the punishment. As a consequence, Judah became a vassal state of Egypt, and Pharaoh Shishak took all the treasures in the king's house and the temple. "He took everything," states the Scripture (verse 9). It is interesting to note that the Ark of the Covenant was apparently not taken, however, because it was in the possession of the Levites in Josiah's reign (2 Chronicles 35:3).

Rehoboam ended his days after a 17-year reign. Tragically, most of his reign was wasted as a petty vassal king, dominated by Egypt, without much power, and constantly engaged in border skirmishes with Israel to the north. The Scripture closes its history of Rehoboam by noting that "he did evil, because he did not prepare his heart to seek the LORD" (12:14). What a pity—so much tragedy could have been avoided had he only devoted himself to seeking God.

Abijam (1 Kings 15:1-8; 2 Chronicles 13)

January 13

Establishing the chronology of the kings of Israel and Judah is not a straightforward exercise, and Abijam's reign provides a simple example. He begins his reign in the 18th year of Jeroboam. His son Asa begins his reign in the 20th year. Yet Abijam (called Abijah in 2 Chronicles 13, and Abia in 1 Chronicles 3) is said to have reigned three years. This may be because he reigned during portions of three years. But more likely, there was some overlap or co-regency (shared rule) in their reigns. This was done with David and Solomon, and is a fairly common occurrence among the kings, albeit not always stated directly.

In 2 Chronicles 13, Abijah's mother is given as Michaiiah, the daughter of Uriel. First Kings 5 says she was Maachah, which is probably a second name or variant, just as Abijam himself had different forms of his name. Maachah is also listed in some translations as the daughter of Abishalom, but granddaughter, as in the New King James Version, seems more likely. She can have only one father, and Abishalom is probably David's son Absalom, who had been killed many decades earlier. By way of explanation, ancient Hebrew was typically written with consonants only (no vowels), so spelling variations among names are fairly common.

While most of Abijam's story is recorded in Chronicles instead of Kings, the reference in 1 Kings 15:7 to the "book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah" is apparently to some other book, as our book of Chronicles appears to have been written long after the books of Kings. (In our next reading, we will see a reference in 1 Kings 14:19 to the "book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel"—yet *another* book.)

As is often the case, Chronicles relates a story that emphasizes the priesthood and the more positive aspects of the Davidic kings. Of course, putting together all the accounts in Scripture of a particular ruler's life yields a more complete picture. Abijam was not given a high rating in 1 Kings 15:3, yet Chronicles records an appeal to Jeroboam that illustrates how the proper temple worship (compare Ezekiel 44:15; 48:11) continued under most of the Jewish kings—often with the king's approval—even when the king saw no personal need to steer himself or the nation clear of idolatry. The victory over Jeroboam is attributed to Judah's reliance on God (verse 18).

Asa, Nadab, Baasha (2 Chronicles 14:1-8; 1 Kings 14:19-20; 15:9-11, 25-34)

January 14

The war between Abijam and Jeroboam set up a period of peace for Abijam's successor, Asa. One of the most righteous and zealous kings of Judah during much of his reign, Asa carried out extensive reforms, which we will see more about in our next reading. For turning to God, Asa was blessed with an entire decade of peace, during which he was able to fortify the kingdom.

But while Asa was enjoying quiet, the kingdom of Israel was suffering great internal turmoil. In Asa's second year, the independent northern kingdom lost its founding king. Then Jeroboam's son Nadab lasted less than two years before the first of Israel's seven changes of dynasty took place. As prophesied by Ahijah (1 Kings 14:10), Baasha was very thorough in getting rid of Jeroboam's descendants. But he did not prove to be any better at obeying God.

Asa's Faith and Reforms (2 Chronicles 14:9–15:19; 1 Kings 15:12-15)

January 15

After 10 years of peace, Judah was challenged by an enormous Ethiopian army of a million men. Since Egypt was strong at this time—in the wake of Pharaoh Shishak's reign, during which the Ethiopians fought for the Egyptians (2 Chronicles 12:3)—it is likely that Zerah and his forces were mercenaries of Egypt.

This battle takes place about 25 miles southwest of Jerusalem at Mareshah. Thanks to the intervention of God (2 Chronicles 14:12), Asa miraculously defeats the million-man army and pursues the fleeing remnants to Gerar, another 25 miles further to the southwest. Asa's reliance on

God and subsequent victory, his response to the encouragement of the prophet and his revival of temple worship encourage many in the northern kingdom to “defect” to him.

The King James Version refers to Maachah, daughter (granddaughter) of Absalom, as the “mother” of Asa (1 Kings 15:13)—and that is the literal Hebrew. Yet she is also listed as the mother of Asa’s father Abijam. The New King James Version therefore substitutes “grandmother” in verse 13. Apparently something happened to Asa’s real mother, and the fact that his grandmother is referred to as his mother could imply that he was actually *reared* by his grandmother. It is a tribute to Asa’s character that he recognized her idolatry and deposed her from the honored position of queen mother, which she continued to hold from Abijam’s reign.

Asa and Baasha (2 Chronicles 16:1-10; 1 Kings 15:16-22; 16:1-7)

January 16

While Asa started his reign well, the wars with Baasha presented a trial in which he did not fare so well spiritually. Baasha, we are told, fortified Ramah. “Ramah was about five and a half miles north of Jerusalem on the main north-south commercial route through the land, and it was therefore of great importance to both kingdoms. It gave east-west access to both the foothills of Ephraim and the Mediterranean coast, so it was of strategic military importance as well. Baasha was striking a blow for control of the center of the land” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 1 Kings 15:17). Sadly, rather than trust in God for deliverance, Asa takes all the money from the temple and palace treasuries and uses it to buy the assistance of the Syrian king, Ben-Hadad (a title shared by a number of Syrian rulers)—who does then break his alliance with Baasha by helping Judah.

There is some question about the timing of these events. Chronicles seems to state that Baasha began his embargo of Judah in Asa’s 36th year. But Baasha’s reign, which began in Asa’s third year, lasted only 24 years (1 Kings 15:33). Thus, Baasha was not even reigning during Asa’s 36th year. So how could he have fortified Ramah at that time? The most logical explanation seems to be that what is meant in Chronicles is that this was the 36th year of Asa’s *kingdom*—i.e., of Judah as its own kingdom since the division of the monarchy—which would place the fortification of Ramah in the 16th year of Asa and 13th year of Baasha.

The prophet Hanani is sent to reprimand Asa and remind him of his previous reliance on God, which had resulted in an amazing victory over a million-man army instead of his shameful stooping to buy a retreat. Asa does not like the correction, imprisons Hanani, and takes his anger out on the people. In the meantime, Hanani’s son Jehu is sent to Baasha to tell him that his following Jeroboam’s sinful actions would result in his receiving Jeroboam’s punishment. And indeed, as with Jeroboam, his son reigns only two years before he is deposed and the dynasty of Baasha is wiped out.

Asa and Elah, Zimri, Omri, Ahab

(1 Kings 16:8-34; 15:23-24; 2 Chronicles 16:11-14)

January 17

Zimri is used by God to execute judgment on the house of Baasha, Israel’s second “dynasty.” In the course of seven days, Zimri destroys Elah and the rest of Baasha’s descendants before meeting his own end—by his own hand—in the face of Omri’s siege, thus ending the brief reign of the third family to rule over Israel.

Omri, however, is not unchallenged. Half of the people choose a man named Tibni to rule over them instead. Tibni and Omri carry out this stalemate for four years before Omri prevails and assumes sole rulership.

Among other things, Omri was responsible for moving the capital of the northern kingdom from Tirzah to its final location at Samaria. Apparently he was fairly famous in the ancient world, since historic artifacts not only mention him, but even refer to future Israelite dynasties using his name. Around 200 years after his reign, Israel was still called by the Assyrians *mat bit-Humri*, “Land of the House of Omri.” *Humri* or *Khumri* is the origin of the term Cimmerians, by which the Israelites of the Assyrian captivity later became known (see *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*, pp. 26-34). Omri was probably also responsible for the alliance with the Phoenician king Ethbaal of Sidon, which resulted in the marriage of their children, Ahab and Jezebel.

Ahab, who succeeded his father on the throne, was directly mentioned in ancient Assyrian records—yet another ancient character from the Bible attested to in secular history, proving the Bible is not pure myth, as some today maintain.

Soon after Ahab began ruling in the north, Asa developed some sort of foot disease. He “may have been suffering from gout, a common disease in the ancient world” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 2 Chronicles 16:12). But continuing in his slide away from trusting in God, rather than seeking divine help he relies solely on the physicians to treat his disease, which grows very severe and probably

contributes to his death. It should be noted that going to a physician for the treatment of an ailment is not inherently wrong. Indeed, that is often an appropriate and responsible thing to do. The error is failing to put our primary trust in *God* as our Healer. If we are looking to Him and His intervention above all, there is no problem in considering physical means of treatment that He, as the Creator, has ultimately provided for.

Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 17; 1 Kings 22:41-44; 2 Chronicles 20:31-33) January 18

Jehoshaphat begins his reign by fortifying the border cities with Israel to increase security—all the while looking to God. And God blesses him immensely for zealously seeking and obeying Him. The king institutes major reforms in this vein. Perhaps his most remarkable action is to send out teachers to instruct the nation in God’s laws!

Notice that there is an apparent contradiction between 2 Chronicles 17:6 and 20:33—the first stating that he removed the high places and the latter saying they were not removed. *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary* gives this explanation in its note on the latter verse: “Those [high places] on which idolatry was practiced were entirely destroyed, but those where the people, notwithstanding the erection of the temple, continued to worship the true God, prudence required to be slowly and gradually abolished, in deference to popular prejudice.” Of course, often what seems “prudent” to men is in fact *compromise* with God’s express instructions. The Lord no doubt expected a stronger stand to be taken—which is why the failure to remove the high places receives repeated mention throughout the reigns of Judah’s righteous rulers.

And this is not Jehoshaphat’s only weakness. As the years go by he establishes an alliance with Ahab, which proves to be a mistake on several fronts, as we shall see. Nevertheless, he continues to maintain a right relationship with God overall and proves to be one of Judah’s better kings.

Ahab and Elijah (1 Kings 17) January 19

The great prophet Elijah is now introduced. *Halley’s Bible Handbook* states: “Six chapters are given to Ahab’s reign, while most of the kings have only a part of one chapter. The reason: it is largely the story of Elijah.... Elijah’s ‘rare, sudden and brief appearances, his undaunted courage and fiery zeal, the brilliance of his triumphs, the pathos of his despondency, the glory of his departure, and the calm beauty of his reappearance [in a vision] on the Mt. of Transfiguration, make him one of the grandest characters Israel ever produced’” (1965, note on 1 Kings 17). It is noteworthy that only two prophets appeared in the vision with Jesus in the transfiguration—Moses and Elijah (Matthew 17:1-9).

Elijah’s ministry would be the pattern for later important ministries. Elijah’s successor, Elisha, received Elijah’s mantle with a mandate to carry on the same type of ministry—even completing some of the tasks given to Elijah. John the Baptist went “before [Jesus Christ] in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17). The rest of Luke 1:17 adds further understanding of the overall perspective of the original ministry of Elijah. And in Malachi 4:5, God says: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.” Apparently, John the Baptist was the forerunner of an end-time Elijah figure, who would preach in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way for Christ’s second coming (compare Matthew 17:10-12).

In marrying Jezebel and accommodating her religion, Ahab allowed Baal worship to be reintroduced in a big way into Israel (1 Kings 16:31-33). Prior to this time, the Kingdom of Israel’s apostasy had apparently been confined to the sin of Jereboam son of Nebat, who built the golden calves and established new worship centers in Dan and Bethel. Near the end of the wilderness wanderings under Moses, there had been a brief encounter with Baal of Peor in connection with the Balaam incident (Numbers 25:3-9; compare Revelation 2:14). And some Baal and Ashtoreth worship had taken place in the rather disorganized period of the judges (Judges 2:11-19; 3:7; 6:25-32; 8:33; 10:6-16; 1 Samuel 7:3-4; 12:9-11). Solomon had built altars to various pagan deities, some of which were equated at times with Baal (1 Kings 11:1-8). But since the days of Samuel, through the period of the kings up until Ahab (about 200 years), there is no specific mention of Israelite Baal worship taking place.

Now, however, Jezebel not only brings in Baal worship but attempts to destroy all of the prophets of God, 100 of whom are protected by the God-fearing governor of Ahab’s house, as we will see in our next reading (1 Kings 18:3-4). So God sends one of the most famous prophets of the Bible, Elijah, to pronounce judgment on Ahab, beginning with a three-and-a-half-year drought (Luke 4:25; James 5:17-18) and its resulting famine. The drought was apparently a forerunner and type of a future drought referred to in the book of Revelation (11:3, 6). However, the end-time drought will be

much greater in scope—as the dire events preceding Christ’s return will be worse than any that have ever happened (Matthew 24:21).

Amazingly, in the growing sparseness of the land, God wonderfully provides for His servant via special delivery from the birds of the air!

Ironically, Zarephath—Elijah’s place of refuge during the latter years of the drought, where God miraculously provides for the widow and her son who take him in—was in the region of Sidon (see Luke 4:26), the same territory that Jezebel came from (1 Kings 16:31).

God’s provision through the multiple miracles we see here should encourage our faith. He can take care of our needs even when it looks like it’s impossible to meet them (see Matthew 6:25-34).

The Contest With the Prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:1-40)

January 20

First, we should take inspiration from the godly and heroic example of Obadiah (not the same as the author of the biblical book by that name). Next, Elijah extends an invitation to a grand test to show who is the true God and who are His servants. Elijah told the people that it was time for them to stop sitting on the fence—faltering between two opinions by the syncretism of intermingling the worship of the true God with the worship of Baal. The same message applies today to the participants of modern Christendom, who, however unwittingly, mix elements of pagan worship—such as crosses, Christmas trees, Sunday observance, Easter eggs and Easter bunnies—with the worship of the God of the Bible.

The contest Elijah arranges was designed to apparently give every advantage to the Baal worshippers. Mount Carmel, near the modern city of Haifa on the Mediterranean coast, was considered sacred to Baal. The answering by fire apparently referred to lightning—and Baal was considered to be the god of storm, with lightning in his divine arsenal. Moreover, Elijah calls for his own sacrifice to the true God, and even the firewood it was to be burned upon, to be thoroughly and completely soaked with water—an ironic touch considering the kingdom had been plagued by a three-and-a-half-year drought that had started at Elijah’s command.

Moreover Elijah is just one against 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:22). It does not appear that the 400 prophets of Asherah answered the challenge (compare verse 19). Incidentally, we should consider Elijah’s statement that he alone is left a prophet of the Lord (verse 22). Why would he say this, since Obadiah had just reported his hiding of 100 of God’s prophets? (Verses 4, 13.) Perhaps they had been killed after Obadiah hid them, though it seems unlikely that this would have gone unmentioned in context. More likely Elijah was referring in verse 22 to himself being the only true prophet still carrying on a public ministry. The others had all gone underground.

The prophets of Baal probably begin calling on their gods by the time of the morning sacrifice. To evoke some sort of response from their god, they leap about and chant. By noon, the supposed height of the power of their sun god, there was still no answer—and Elijah begins his taunting. “Busy” in verse 27 is a euphemism. Notice the verse in the Contemporary English Version: “At noon, Elijah began making fun of them. ‘Pray louder!’ he said. ‘Baal must be a god. Maybe he’s daydreaming or using the toilet or traveling somewhere. Or maybe he’s asleep, and you have to wake him up.’”

And rather than give up, they do cry out louder, leaping more earnestly—and they even “cut themselves, *as was their custom*” (verse 28). So, as bizarre as it may seem, such uncontrolled frenzy and self-mutilation were actually normal elements in their worship. This illustrates how pagan religion is often quite harmful to its participants. By contrast, the true religion God gave through Moses forbade such cuttings in the flesh (Leviticus 21:5; 19:28).

All of this continues until the time of the evening sacrifice, when Elijah finally takes his turn, beginning with the construction of God’s altar and the soaking of the sacrifice. In the end, God showed Himself to be the true God over storms, with real power to control the elements—indeed, the true God over *all*, while Baal was proven to be nothing.

Elijah Flees From Jezebel (1 Kings 18:41–19:21)

January 21

With the storm to end the three-and-a-half-year drought approaching, Elijah, by the power of God, runs the 13 miles to Jezreel faster than Ahab’s horse-drawn chariot.

In spite of the miraculous victory over Baal at Carmel, and the miracles that immediately followed, Jezebel’s threat on Elijah’s life is too much for him. Greatly distraught, he flees to the south, attempting to run away from the danger—his recently strengthened faith apparently evaporated. All of God’s people are subject to such moments. As the apostle James wrote, “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours” (James 5:17). Indeed, it is when we think we stand that we must take warning lest we fall (1 Corinthians 10:12). It should be noted that some mental depression that

comes after a big crisis or challenge is usually partly physical in origin. The burst of physical and mental energy that comes with the high level of adrenaline released is often followed by a letdown when the adrenaline wears off.

In his rash flight, Elijah does not even stop in Judah, now ruled by righteous King Jehoshaphat. Instead, he flees *far* to the south, seeking refuge at Mount Sinai (Horeb), where God meets with him. God does not scold Elijah for his fear and self-pity. Instead, He comforts him. God lets Elijah know that he is not alone—that even if he is not aware of them, or has forgotten about them, there are others who have not followed Baal.

And to further help combat the depression, God gives Elijah three tasks to perform. (Staying busy in a productive manner often helps in such situations.) God tells him to appoint successors in various responsibilities. One such successor (Jehu) will wipe out all of Ahab's family, which by then will extend even into the kingdom of Judah. Another will change the leadership of Syria, Israel's chief enemy of that time. The third is to be Elijah's own successor, and the man who actually ends up performing the other two tasks.

Elisha's response is immediate and enthusiastic. "He arose and followed Elijah, and became his servant" (1 Kings 19:21)—working under Elijah like an apprentice.

Ahab and the First Syrian Campaign (1 Kings 20:1-22)

January 22

Ben-Hadad of Syria here is not the same as the Syrian ruler with the same title in 1 Kings 15. Commentators and historians refer to the one here in 1 Kings 20 as Ben-Hadad II. He besieges Samaria, capital of the kingdom of Israel, and offers Ahab conditions of surrender. Ahab agrees to meet those conditions to prevent further war. But whether the Syrian king is simply greedy, or perhaps more interested in war than spoils, he decides to increase the demands, which Ahab then says is too much.

As a demonstration to Ahab of His sovereignty and power, God sends a prophet to tell Ahab that He will grant him the victory. And, as always, God is true to His word. But the fighting is not yet over. After his success, Ahab is warned that Ben-Hadad will return in the spring.

Ahab's Life for Ben-Hadad's (1 Kings 20:23-43)

January 23

As promised, the Syrians plan another attack. But they make the fatal error of concluding that God is a territorial deity, incapable of assisting the Israelites outside of a prescribed area. They arrange for this battle to take place in the area south and east of the Sea of Galilee, feeling God will be powerless there. Of course, they are profoundly mistaken. The great and omnipotent God delivers them into Ahab's hands.

But following the Syrian defeat, the servants of Ben-Hadad II attempt to get off easy by appealing to Israel's tendency to forgive and forget. While this is normally a positive and godly trait in interpersonal relationships, extending it to carnal nations reflects a naïve trust in man, and is sometimes done against God's will and to Israel's own hurt.

God sends yet another prophet to Ahab, this time with a theatrical tale reminiscent of some incidents in David's life (compare 2 Samuel 12; 14). The Living Bible paraphrases the prophet's words in 1 Kings 20:42 as: "The Lord says, 'Because you have spared the man I said must die, now you must die in his place, and your people shall perish instead of his.'" Ahab, however, does not respond as David did—but rather sulks back to his capital in anger.

Naboth's Vineyard (1 Kings 21)

January 24

Technically, all land in ancient Israel belonged to God, who granted it to be permanently held by each Israelite tribe and family (Leviticus 25:23-28). Thus the property was clearly Naboth's (compare Numbers 36:2-9). Even the king, a constitutional monarch, was required to obey the law (1 Samuel 10:25).

"In reminding Ahab that he was king and could do as he pleased, Jezebel reflected her Canaanite background where kings ruled absolutely (see Deut. 17:14-20; 1 Sam. 8:11-18)" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 21:7). Regarding 1 Kings 21:7, *The Bible Reader's Companion* explains: "The Heb[rew] reads literally, 'You now; you are going to perform majesty over Israel.' The saying seems to indicate that she will show Ahab how to magnify himself by having his way in Israel. Her use of the king's seal indicates that she had his authority for her plot against Naboth. Ahab lent her his full support" (Lawrence Richards, 1991, note on 21:7-14).

Jezebel's murderous plot then unfolds. "Some suggest that the charge made by the two 'scoundrels' was that Naboth went back on a pledge made in God's name to sell his land to the king.

Failure to keep an oath made in God's name would be blasphemy. In that case, after Naboth's execution, the king could legally have taken possession of the property in dispute. Second Kings 9:26 adds that Naboth's sons were killed at the same time. With no heir left alive, there seemingly was no one left to dispute Ahab's claim to the land" (same note).

Ahab and Jezebel's behavior regarding Naboth prompts the return of Elijah—this time to pronounce the termination of Ahab's rule and the extermination of his dynasty similar to the warning given earlier to Jeroboam and Baasha. This will be carried out by Jehu son of Nimshi, a military leader, as God had previously told Elijah (1 Kings 19:16-17). Yet Ahab's expression of remorse results in God postponing some of the punishment, illustrating His tremendous mercy.

Micaiah's Warning (1 Kings 22:1-28; 2 Chronicles 18:1-27)

January 25

Assyrian history records another war involving Ahab, which appears to have taken place during the three-year truce with Syria (1 Kings 22:1). The Assyrians began to rise in power, and made an advance toward the coastal area far north of Israel. Apparently Ahab joined an alliance of nations in repelling their advance, and, according to the inscriptions of Shalmaneser III, he supplied about one half (2,000) of the chariots and perhaps a sixth (10,000) of the infantry.

Jehoshaphat also forms an alliance with Ahab. As part of the alliance, their children, Jehoram and Athaliah, are married (2 Chronicles 18:1; 21:6). Jehoshaphat pays a visit to his ally, and Ahab proposes that Jehoshaphat join him in an attempt to recover Ramoth-Gilead from the Syrians in yet a third war with them. This was a town on the east side of the Jordan that belonged to Gad and had originally been designated as a city of refuge (Deuteronomy 4:41-43).

Jehoshaphat agrees but insists on finding out God's will in the matter first. For some reason, when asked about a prophet of God, Ahab does not mention Elijah or his assistant Elisha. Perhaps they were known to be away and not available. In any case, though many true prophets had been killed earlier in Ahab's reign, there were still a few around. Here we are introduced to the prophet Micaiah, who is mentioned nowhere else in Scripture unless, as some have speculated, he is the same Micaiah sent out by Jehoshaphat to teach in Judah (2 Chronicles 17:7). One of the saddest aspects of this encounter is that Jehoshaphat, too, is persuaded to ignore the message from the prophet of God whom he had specifically asked to hear from.

Remarkably, we get a glimpse in our current reading of how God actually sometimes uses even demons to fulfill His purposes. Notice that God did not command any spirit here to lie. He simply asked who would do it and told the volunteer to go do what he was inclined to do anyway. The fact that Micaiah's true prophecies were always at odds with those of Ahab's prophets (compare 1 Kings 22:8) would seem to imply that a "lying spirit" was *commonly* behind the words of Ahab's prophets.

Notice this from *The Bible Reader's Companion*: "Did God Himself lie to Ahab? Not at all. He did permit Ahab's prophets to lie.... [But] God in fact clearly revealed to Ahab the source of his prophets' predictions, and the truth about what would happen to him in the coming battle. Ahab's death resulted from refusing to believe the truth, not from a failure to know it. Let's be careful not to blame God for the consequences of our own fully conscious choices" (note on 1 Kings 22).

Ahab Dies; Jehoshaphat Rebuked

(1 Kings 22:29-40, 51-53; 2 Chronicles 18:28-19:11)

January 26

Jehoshaphat is nearly killed when it turns out the Syrian strategy is to specifically target the man who has defeated them twice already, and Jehoshaphat is the only one looking the part. Chronicles reveals that it is God who intervenes to save him, while at the same time causing a random arrow to find its target between the joints of Ahab's armor, in the middle of his back.

When Jehoshaphat returns to Jerusalem, he is met by Jehu (son of Hanani), the same prophet God had sent to Israel's king Baasha more than 30 years earlier (1 Kings 16:1-7). It was Jehu's father, Hanani, who had been imprisoned by Jehoshaphat's father Asa for correcting him about not relying on God in his dealings with Syria (2 Chronicles 16:7-10). Now Jehu reprimands Jehoshaphat for forming an alliance with, and helping, Ahab. Unlike his father, Jehoshaphat apparently maintains a good attitude and continues to seek God, although he renews his alliance in treaties with Ahab's sons (2 Chronicles 20:35; 2 Kings 3:7).

"But Our Eyes Are Upon You" (2 Chronicles 20:1-30)

January 27

One of Jehoshaphat's better moments comes when Moab, Ammon and Edomites of Mount Seir initiate a war with Judah. Jehoshaphat calls a fast, assembles the nation together at the temple and seeks God's deliverance through heartfelt prayer. Jehoshaphat prays: "O our God, will You not judge

them? For we have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are upon You” (verse 12).

In response, God informs the people of Judah that in the upcoming “battle” they will not have to fight at all, and yet the victory will be theirs. Jehoshaphat believes God, and the next morning the army marches forth singing praises to God instead of planning battle strategies. When they arrive, at an area about 10 miles south of Jerusalem, the opposing armies have fought among themselves and killed each other—an incredible and obvious miracle that strikes fear in the hearts of enemy nations.

Jehoshaphat Allies With Ahaziah

(2 Chronicles 20:34-37; 1 Kings 22:45-49; 2 Kings 1; 3:1-3)

January 28

Generally speaking, Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, walked in the way of God. But he did not do all that he should have, as he did not remove all the high places from Judah (2 Chronicles 20:33). Yet it should be noted, as mentioned previously in the Bible Reading Program, that this was a common oversight attributed to most of Judah’s righteous kings, and is perhaps equally if not more due to a lack of wholeheartedness in obeying God on the part of the nation. A more apparent weakness of Jehoshaphat can be seen in the compromising nature of his allying himself with evil rulers, a fault that became evident again near the end of his life when he allied himself with Israel’s wicked King Ahaziah, son of Ahab (1 Kings 22:51-53). But their joint ventures would not prosper, since God does not generally bless such dealings (compare 2 Chronicles 20:35-37).

Though God will sometimes intervene for the sake of a righteous person in such circumstances (compare 2 Kings 3:14), we shouldn’t count on it—particularly when we know better. God does not want us to enter into binding partnerships with the wicked that could conflict with our commitment to Him and His ways. His warnings are still the same today: How can two walk together unless they are agreed? (Amos 3:3.) In general, Christians can’t work effectively in close relationships with unbelievers—in godly peace and harmony—any more than mismatched animals can make a useful plowing team for a farmer. The way people who live righteously think is as different from those who disregard God’s laws as day is from night (compare 2 Corinthians 6:14-18). Ungodly partners can lead to spiritual compromise (see 1 Corinthians 15:33). Of course, there may be some business arrangements where such matters would never be at issue. But any that are considered must be given close scrutiny without glossing over potential difficulties. Despite Jehoshaphat’s errors in this regard, it appears that he later recognized that he should not have allied himself with Ahaziah (compare 1 Kings 22:49).

Ahaziah became sick, and rather than establishing a relationship with the true God and placing his trust in Him, he attempted to inquire of the pagan god Baal-Zebub whether he would live or die. As a consequence, God sent the prophet Elijah to the king and informed him that he would not be healed (2 Kings 1:1-6, 15-17). Even then, King Ahaziah did not humble himself and repent, as his father Ahab had done at least temporarily (1 Kings 21:17-29). He attempted to have Elijah arrested (2 Kings 1:9). God, however, made it very clear that He was with Elijah, and that He would protect him from the king’s evil devices (2:10-15).

After King Ahaziah’s death (1:18), his brother Jehoram (called Joram in 8:25), another son of evil King Ahab, became king over Israel since Ahaziah himself had no son (1:17; 3:1). Jehoram did evil in God’s sight, but not to the extent that his father Ahab had, as he did put away his father’s sacred pillar of Baal (verses 2-3).

Elijah’s Ascension to “Heaven”; Elisha Succeeds Him (2 Kings 2)

January 29

The incident in which Elijah was “taken up into heaven by a whirlwind” (verse 1) has many people convinced that we will go to heaven when we die. But John 3:13 clearly says that “*no one has ascended to heaven* but He who came down from heaven,” referring to Jesus Christ. Therefore, Elijah could not have gone to heaven. How do we reconcile this apparent contradiction?

The answer lies in the fact that the Bible speaks of *more than one* heaven—indeed, of three. Scripture refers to the atmosphere of this earth, the sky, as “heaven” (Genesis 27:28). It speaks of the physical universe beyond as “heaven” (Psalm 8:3). And it speaks of God’s dwelling place in the spirit realm as “heaven” (Revelation 4:1-3). It is from this “third heaven” (2 Corinthians 12:2), the heaven of God’s throne, that Christ came—and to which no other human being has ascended (John 3:13).

Thus, Elijah did not go to the third heaven. So what happened to him? Where did he go? To help us understand, we need to know of other events that happened in Israel and Judah in the years following. Right at the time of Elijah’s ascension, Jehoram became the new king of Israel—in the

18th year of Jehoshaphat of Judah and the second year of Jehoshaphat's son, whose name was also Jehoram (2 Kings 1:17; 3:1)—meaning there was an overlapping father-son reign over Judah at this time. In the fifth year of the reign of Israel's Jehoram, Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram became king over Judah (8:16)—that is, *sole* king following the death of Jehoshaphat. It was following the death of Jehoshaphat and becoming sole ruler that Jehoram of Judah, a wicked ruler, killed all his brothers (2 Chronicles 21:1-4). *Afterward*, Jehoram of Judah received *a letter from Elijah* (verse 12). The letter makes reference to the king's murder of his brothers (verse 13), showing that it was written after that event. And, putting the chronology together, this was more than four years after Elijah's ascension. Thus, Elijah was still alive more than four years after he was taken up by the fiery chariot in the whirlwind, *living somewhere here on earth*. His ascension, then, must have only been into the *first* heaven—the sky. And it should be clear that he did not die when he ascended. Rather, God transported him to another place on the earth where he lived out the rest of his days. The Bible doesn't say why God decided to make such a change at this point.

Elisha became Elijah's successor, symbolized by the passing of the mantle (2 Kings 2:13-14) and confirmed by the "double portion" of the power that God gave him through His Spirit, enabling him to perform mighty miracles, such as healing poisonous waters (verses 19-22.) It should be noted that the concept of a "double portion" in Scripture normally denoted a birthright inheritance of the firstborn son in a family. In that usage, it did not mean twice as much as the father had but, rather, twice as much as the other sons received from the father. It appears that Elisha's request was similar. If this is the case, then Elisha, understanding that the portion of spiritual power that Elijah had from God would be divided out to the sons of the prophets, was asking for twice as much as what they would receive rather than twice as much as what Elijah had. In any case, this was not a selfish request. Elisha had already been anointed to succeed Elijah—and he knew that he would need more of God's help than anyone if he were to remotely fill Elijah's shoes.

The account ends with Elisha departing and being mocked by a sizable group of young people. The Hebrew here can mean children, teenagers or young adults in their early 20s. Judging by Elisha's response they were certainly old enough to know better and to be held accountable for their actions, implying they likely were teens or young adults. Their taunt, in modern parlance, would essentially be, "Go up in the air, baldy!" Thus, they mocked his report of Elijah's ascension, and they made fun of him for his baldness. Elisha cursed them for their disbelief and flagrant disrespect for God's prophet—actually disrespect for God—and God backed up Elisha by sending the bears. Note that it does not say the youths who suffered attack were killed—just that they were "mauled" by the bears (verse 24), the Hebrew here allowing for a wide range of injury.

Israel and Judah's War Against Moab (2 Kings 3:4-27)

January 30

After the death of King Ahab of Israel, Mesha, the king of Moab, refused to pay his regular tribute to Israel. "The existence of this Moabite king is confirmed by an inscription on a pillar known as the Moabite Stone [now in the Louvre Museum in Paris]. The inscription indicates that Omri had conquered the plains of Moab north of the Arnon River and that the area remained under Israelite control throughout Ahab's reign" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 4).

To fight against Moab, the new king of Israel, Jehoram, formed an alliance with the king of Edom and with King Jehoshaphat of Judah (who should have learned from his earlier experience with King Ahaziah to not participate in such an alliance). Jehoshaphat insisted, however, on first consulting Elisha, whom, for the sake of Jehoshaphat, God inspired to prophesy victory. Then, due to God's miraculous intervention, the army of Israel defeated Moab, invaded their territory, destroyed their cities and ruined their lands, their trees and their springs of water. During a battle, the king of Moab offered in his anxiety his oldest son, who would have become king after him, as a burnt offering to his pagan god. When he did so, "there was a great indignation against [or upon] Israel. So they [the Israelites] departed from him [the king of Moab] and returned to their own land" (verse 27).

One scholar explains: "The Hebrew word translated 'indignation' is *ketsef*...[which here] denotes the psychological breakdown or trauma that affected the Israelite forces when they beheld the sign of human sacrifice atop the walls of Kir-Hareseth.... Apparently, it had happened before, elsewhere, and could be counted on as a kind of conditional reflex. It follows that Mesha's sacrifice of his son, rather than unprecedented, was in fact an integral, if seldom implemented, part of an age-old Canaanite tradition of sacral warfare.... Mesha's sacrifice of his firstborn, seen in this new light, was virtually guaranteed to save the lives of the entire population—men, women and children—of the city under

siege” (Baruch Margalit, “Why King Mesha of Moab Sacrificed His Oldest Son,” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Nov.–Dec. 1986, p. 63). Israel, losing the heart to press the battle further, decided to depart.

**The Widow’s Oil, Childless Woman
and Other Miracles (2 Kings 4:1-17, 38-44)**

January 31

As we already saw, God, who had given Elisha a double portion of the spiritual power that Elijah had had, empowered Elisha thereby to perform miracles. And mighty miracles they were. A widow, believing that God would do what Elisha had announced, received supernaturally so much oil that she could sell it and pay off all her debts with the money and still live off the rest (verses 1-7). Elisha also prophesied accurately to a Shunammite woman who had shown kindness to him, but who was without child, that she would have a child within a year (verses 8-17). We are reminded of God’s promise to Sarah that she would have a child, too, within a year (compare Genesis 18:10-14; 21:1-2). In reading the entire story of Elisha’s friendship with the woman at Shunem, we are also reminded of his predecessor, Elijah, who had a rather similar friendship with the widow of Zarephath (compare 1 Kings 17:8-16). The parallel will become even more apparent in a later reading.

Elisha caused a stew of poisonous wild gourds to be transformed into healthy food (2 Kings 4:38-41), and he fed 100 people with 20 loaves of barley bread and some grain (verses 42-44). This last incident reminds us of Christ’s miracles centuries later, when He fed masses of people with a few loaves of bread and some fishes. In both instances, the source of miracle working power was the same—the Spirit of God. In fact, both Christ, while here on earth as a human being, and Elisha had those powers only because God’s Spirit was working in and through them. While a man, Christ Himself said that He of Himself could do nothing (John 5:30), i.e., nothing supernatural on His own. He needed the power of the Father (John 14:10). Peter later testified that “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the *Holy Spirit and with power*, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, *for God was with Him*” (Acts 10:38).

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