

JEROBOAM BEN NEBAT: A REAPPRAISAL

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INTRODUCTION

Jeroboam ben Nebat, from the tribe of Ephraim, was the first king of the northern Israelite Kingdom following the revolt of the ten northern tribes against Rehoboam that put an end to the United Monarchy. He reigned for approximately 22 years, from 928 to 907 BCE. TB *Sanhedrin* 101b explains that his name means “one that caused strife between the people and their Heavenly Father.”¹ This characterization of Jeroboam is also found in Avot 5:18, “He that leads the many to virtue, through him shall no sin befall; but he that leads the many to sin, to him shall be given no means for repentance. Moses was virtuous and he led the many to virtue; the virtue of the many depended on him, as it is written, *He executed the justice of the Lord and his judgments with Israel* (Deut. 13:21). Jeroboam sinned and he led the many to sin; the sin of the many depended on him, as it is written, *for the sins of Jeroboam which he sinned and wherewith he made Israel sin* (I Kgs. 15:30). These and similar statements from rabbinic literature have led to the standard traditional view of Jeroboam as a villain. However, in many ways he functioned as a positive and constructive leader.

EARLY CAREER OF JEROBOAM

Jeroboam ben Nebat, like Saul and David, was chosen by Divine Providence and told of his royal vocation by a prophet (I Kgs. 11:31). He was a fatherless orphan raised and educated by his widowed mother (11:26). Josephus, describes him as having been of a noble and daring spirit.²

In I Kings 11:28 he is referred to as *a mighty man of valor*. Because of these exemplary qualities, King Solomon appointed him foreman of a project to seal the breaches in the walls of Jerusalem and to erect the Millo, a fortress at the entrance to Jerusalem (11:27). Thereafter, he was made taskmaster of the house of Joseph. As the royal overseer of *all the labor of the house of Joseph* (11:28), he came face to face with widespread discontent caused by an extensive corvee and an oppressive fiscal system which marked Solo-

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mon's reign. A rebellion was in the making and Jeroboam was the leader of the conspiracy against the King (11:26).

Jeroboam's decision received confirmation from the prophet Ahija the Shilonite. The prophet informed him of the Divine decision to split off ten tribes from the United Davidic Kingdom and that he would be king of an independent Israelite monarchy (11:29-31). When Solomon was apprised of the incipient rebellion he reacted as did Saul under similar circumstances by attempting to execute the presumptive usurper. Jeroboam like David fled for his life to the enemy camp.

In David's day, the enemy had been the Philistines. Two generations later the only nation-state strong enough to withstand pressure from King Solomon to extradite his subject was Egypt. The Egyptian Pharaoh Shishak had ample geopolitical reasons to give Jeroboam asylum and to treat him kindly as he had treated David's enemy, the Edomite prince Hadad (11:26-28). During his exile, which lasted 16 years, Shishak gave Jeroboam his sister in law in marriage and it was this union which produced a son, named Abijah (12:24).

After the death of Solomon, Jeroboam was summoned by his countrymen to return and act as their spokesman at a confrontation with Rehoboam which took place in Shechem (12: 3). The Israelite delegation came to petition Rehoboam to lighten the burdens which his father had placed upon them. This was to be Rehoboam's last chance to save the United Monarchy. Rehoboam imprudently rejected their petition, providing the petitioners ample reason to withdraw from the United Kingdom and declare their independence.

According to the narrative so far, Jeroboam functions as the savior of the Israelites from oppression, appointed by a prophet, while Rehoboam is the foolish king who is directly responsible for the dissolution of the United Kingdom.

A POSITIVE VIEW OF JEROBOAM

In Israel, Jeroboam was viewed as a "second Moses" as the liberator of his people from their oppressor, and as the founder of their kingdom. Like Moses who led the Israelite slaves who toiled in Egypt, so Jeroboam led the Israelites who were made to toil at Solomon's colossal building projects in Jerusalem. Striking comparisons between the Moses narrative and that of Jeroboam are spelled out by A. Shinan and Y. Zakovitz.³

For example:

1. The Israelites built *garrison cities for Pharaoh* (Ex. 1:11). Solomon pressed the Jews into forced labor to build him garrisons: *This was the purpose of the forced labor which Solomon imposed: It was to build . . . all of Solomon's garrison towns* (9:15-19).

2. Pharaoh tries to kill Moses (Ex. 2:15). Solomon sought to put Jeroboam to death (11:40).

3. When Pharaoh dies, Moses returns to Egypt (Ex. 4:19). After learning of Solomon's death, Jeroboam returns to his country (12:2-3).

4. Jeroboam like Moses was chosen by God to lead the Israelites.

5. Moses petitions Pharaoh: *Let my people go . . .* (Ex. 5:1), while Jeroboam petitions Rehoboam: *Now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke which your father laid on us* (12:4).

6. The appeals of both Moses and Jeroboam were counter-productive: *Pharaoh charged the taskmasters saying: 'You shall no longer provide the people with straw for making bricks . . . Let heavier work be laid upon the men . . .'* (Ex. 5:6-9). Rehoboam replies to the petitioners: *My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke* (12:14).

SINS OF JEROBOAM

According to the author of the book of Kings, the Israelite Kingdom was destined to fail from the very outset because of *The sins of Jeroboam ben-Nebat, which he sinned, and which he made Israel to sin, by his provocation wherewith he provoked the Lord, the God of Israel to anger* (15:30). During the Northern Monarchy's 240 year existence sixteen out of the nineteen kings were condemned because *he walked in the way of Jeroboam ben Nebat*. The author refers to Jeroboam's rebellion as the original sin that resulted in the demise of the Israelite kingdom: *For Israel broke away from the House of David . . . In the end, the Lord removed Israel from His presence . . . So the Israelites were deported from their land to Assyria, as is still the case* (II Kgs.17:21-23).

His sins began soon after his coronation, when he commissioned the creation of two golden calves, one at Beth-El the other at Dan (12:28-31). Jeroboam was afraid lest the people would *go up to do sacrifice in the House of the Lord at Jerusalem* (12:27) thereby resuming their allegiance to the house

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of David. Calf worship was not entirely new but rather a reintroduction of a familiar cultic practice known since Israel's sojourn in the wilderness. Moreover, both Dan and Beth-El were cultic holy places prior to the establishment of the Israelite kingdom.

But the Levites in and around Bethel and Dan refused to conduct their priestly duties at the altars of the calves. Jeroboam, unwilling to yield, appointed laymen to replace them. This was an act of defiance against the tribe of Levi who held the priestly office ever since the time of Moses and whose privileges and prerogatives had been set forth in the Torah. In his address to the people, Jeroboam proclaimed, according to Josephus, that henceforth the King will appoint for you priests and Levites from your own number, in order that you may have no need of the tribe of Levi and the sons of Aaron.⁴

Jeroboam's radical proclamation was followed by an exodus of priests, Levites and ordinary Israelites who refused to accept the new order. The Chronicler narrating what transpired following the exodus writes:

And the priests and the Levites that were in all Israel presented themselves to him (i.e. Rehoboam) out of all their borders. For the Levites left their open land and their possession, and came to Judah and Jerusalem; for Jeroboam and his sons cast them off, that they should not execute the priest's office unto the LORD . . . And after them, out of all the tribes of Israel, such as set their hearts to seek the LORD, the God of Israel, came to Jerusalem to sacrifice unto the LORD, the God of their fathers. So they strengthened the kingdom of Judah, and made Rehoboam the son of Solomon strong, three years; for they walked three years in the way of David and Solomon (II Chron. 11:13-17).

Jeroboam further sinned by postponing of the feast of Tabernacles from the biblically mandated seventh month to the fifteenth of the eighth month (12:32, 33). The postponement of the Sukkot festival, resulting in a change in the festival calendar, was the device in antiquity to mark the final separation between two formerly united religious entities. Similarly the Samaritans in ancient Israel introduced a change in the calendar according to the astronomical calculation of the meridian of Mt. Gerizim, in order to affirm their particularity and deviant religious rites.⁵

The Israelites enthusiastically supported their king's innovations judging from the multitude that turned out to accompany the second calf on its way to the sanctuary at Dan (12:20). Some 150 years later during the reign of Jeroboam ben Joash, a contemporary of the prophet Amos, Bethel was still known as *the king's chapel*, a blatant comparison to the sanctuary in Jerusalem (Amos 8:13).

While the establishing of worship of golden calves was clearly sinful there is, surprisingly, no evidence that the Israelite prophet Elijah, who waged a relentless war against Baal worship, ever considered the sanctuary at Bethel with its golden calf particularly offensive (18:22). This may be explained by accepting the approach of Heinrich Graetz that Jeroboam's calves were a representation of the Lord God of Israel, "their installation, was not meant to dispute either His authority or His uniqueness."⁶ Similarly, Martin Buber sees in the calves at Bethel and Dan nothing more than "an improvement on the brazen oxen which carried the basin in Solomon's Temple and served as the throne for the invisible Deity."⁷ W. F. Albright expressed a similar idea, "Jeroboam's sanctuary represented the Deity as an invisible figure standing on a young bull of gold."⁸ J. A. Montgomery even denies that there are any religious implications of Jeroboam's calves, asserting that his calves were "purely political, cleverly founded on the opposition to Solomon's autocracy and centralization of religion. But he had no religious interest beyond the restoration of the local cults."⁹ The generally accepted opinion among modern scholars is that Jeroboam's calves were similar to the golden calf of Aaron which did not preclude his being chosen the first High Priest, and this high office becoming hereditary (Ex. 32:2-24).

Clearly the establishing of the golden calves and their shrines was a sin, but it is not so clear that they were actually idol worship, and seemed to function more as a replacement for the Temple, a structure dedicated to God. Jeroboam used them as a means to secure the autonomy of his kingdom (12:26), something he was mandated to do by the prophet Ahijah (11:37). It was the wrong way to preserve his kingdom, but this sin may be viewed as a religious misstep of an otherwise positive king, who indeed saved his people from oppression.

CONCLUSION

According to TB *Sanhedrin* 102a, Jeroboam was a disciple of the prophet Ahija, who was familiar with the reasons behind all the commandments of the Torah. Ahija did not choose an unknown country lad as king of Israel, but one of his own disciples whom he had known intimately over a period of years and whom he trusted. Jeroboam however did not live up to his master's hopes and expectations. In rabbinic literature he became an iconic evil-doer "one that caused strife between the people and their Heavenly Father" (TB *Sanhedrin* 101b).¹⁰ Arrogance brought about his doom in this world and his exclusion from the world to come. God offered to raise him into the Garden Eden, but when Jeroboam heard that in Paradise David would enjoy the highest honor, he refused this ultimate blessing (TB *Sanhedrin* 102a).

Jeroboam eventually proved to be a failure, but that should not negate the successful and positive aspects of his leadership.

NOTES

1. See also *Yalkut Shimoni*, I Kings 11:196, where further explanations are given, such as "God will increase the number of the people", and "he who fights the battles of his people".
2. Josephus, *Antiquities*, VIII, 7, 7.
3. A. Shinan and Y. Zakovitz, *From Gods to God: How the Bible Debunked, Suppressed, or Changed Ancient Myths and Legends* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Univ. of Neb. Press, 2012) pp. 214-216.
4. Josephus, *Antiquities*, VIII, 8, 4.
5. M. Gaster, *The Samaritans*, (London, 1925), pp. 65-66.
6. H. Graetz, *History of the Jews*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1891) vol.1, chap. 10, pp. 187-8.
7. M. Buber, *Moses* (Oxford: E & W Lib., 1956), p. 148.
8. W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1941), p. 229.
9. J.A. Montgomery, *Book of Kings - International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1951) p. 256.
10. See also, L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1946) vol. IV, p. 180.