

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

WEEK 6: KINGS' HIGHWAY – KINGS & CHRONICLES

Our week 6 signpost leads to the exit of the United Kingdom of David and Solomon and entry into that of the divided kingdom. It takes us into a whole new era. We can call this stage of route 66 the kings' highway because landmarks to the kings line both sides of the road. On the one side there are the 20 kings of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, who reigned between 931BC until the destruction of the kingdom in 722BC, a total of 209 years. On the other side are the 20 kings of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, who reigned from 931BC to the final destruction of that kingdom in 586BC, a total of 345 years. Now, just for a moment imagine travelling along the M4 and trying to see what's on both sides of the motorway at the same time, and trying to notice everything on both sides as you travel at speed along it. You would be perfectly right in saying, "that is downright impossible." Yet, once you come to 1 Kings 12 and 2 Chronicles 10, you feel as if that's what you're being expected to do. That is why we need to travel this part of our route twice. Once to look at the Northern Kingdom of Israel on one side of the road and once to look at the Southern Kingdom of Judah on the other side of it.

In some ways the landmarks on both sides of the road have similarities. On both sides you will find landmarks to kings, religion and prophets. What is not immediately obvious on either side is the fact that all the landmarks relate to how God's sovereignty is being progressively worked out. The Israelites' request for a king was a rejection of divine sovereignty and showed the absence of confidence in Yahweh. So, God used their demand to further His own ends. This set human political ambitions and divine religious ideals on a collision course. So, expect lots of collisions along this part of our route.

God's people were promised a descendant of David and who would be like David. In other words, that descendant would extend His kingdom, would establish true religion and would obediently adhere to God's word as spoken by His prophets. But in order to prepare for the fulfilment of His covenant with David, God had to redefine who were the people who would find a place in His kingdom and who would not.

The Northern kingdom is our first landmark and the question is whether or not its peoples would fit into God's kingdom. From a distance it looks strong and stable. Even a glance at any of the maps that you will find either at the beginning or the end of most bibles, shows that the Northern Kingdom had the widest extent of territory. It had the biggest population because 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel followed Jeroboam. It was economically viable and therefore had all the potential to succeed as an independent state. A closer examination of the reigns of the northern kings shows how these initial signs of hope were very deceiving. Twenty men in all ruled that kingdom. The shortest reign was that of Zimri, which lasted 7 days. The longest was that of Jeroboam II which lasted for 41 years. The rest of the reigns lasted between 1 month and 27 years. A king's position in the Northern kingdom was, at times, very precarious indeed. In spite of some reigns lasting 20 years or more, there was no clear line of succession throughout the 209 years of Israel's existence. Only Jeroboam, Baasha, Omri and Jehu were succeeded by sons. Although, Omri eventually became sole king, for 5 years he had had to share power with Tibni because the 10 tribes had split into two factions.

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

Dynastic succession was also made impossible because of the practice of killing all of the preceding king's family.

1 Kings 15:28-29 (NIV) Baasha killed Nadab As soon as he began to reign, he killed Jeroboam's whole family. He did not leave Jeroboam anyone that breathed, but destroyed them all, according to the word of the Lord given through his servant Ahijah the Shilonite.

1 Kings 16:9-12 (NIV) Zimri, one of his officials, who had command of half his chariots, Elah was in Tirzah at the time, getting drunk in the home of Arza, the palace administrator at Tirzah. 10 Zimri came in, struck him down and killed him Then he succeeded him as king. 11 As soon as he began to reign and was seated on the throne, he killed off Baasha's whole family. He did not spare a single male, whether relative or friend.

2 Kings 9:24 & 10:11 (NIV) Then Jehu drew his bow and shot Jehoram (Joram) between the shoulders. The arrow pierced his heart and he slumped down in his chariot.....So Jehu killed everyone in Jezreel who remained of the house of Ahab, as well as all his chief men, his close friends and his priests, leaving him no survivor.

Less than half of the kings died from natural causes. One committed suicide, one died from a fall. There is no record of Menahem's death and the last king Hoshea's fate is unknown. Two were killed in battle. Five were assassinated by their successors, for after Shallum, assassination became the preferred method of deposing the sitting kings. And none of those who seized power by force could be considered as royalty for they were army commanders or warlords. This failure to establish a clear dynastic succession led to serious intermittent political instability which weakened Israel both internally and externally.

In spite of what was common practice in those times, had the reigns of the kings who stayed in power been peaceful, the kingdom might have had a better chance of surviving for longer.

1 Kings 14:30 & 15:16 (NIV) There was continual warfare between Rehoboam and Jeroboam.....There was war between Asa and Baasha king of Israel throughout their reigns.

1 Kings 20:1 (NIV) Now Ben-Hadad king of Aram mustered his entire army. Accompanied by thirty-two kings with their horses and chariots, he went up and besieged Samaria and attacked it.

2 Kings 10:32-33 (NIV) In those days (Jehu) the Lord began to reduce the size of Israel. Hazael overpowered the Israelites throughout their territory east of the Jordan

2 Kings 15:19 (NIV) & 1 Chronicles 5:26 Then Pul king of Assyria invaded the land, and Menahem gave him a thousand talents of silver to gain his support and strengthen his own hold on the kingdom..... So the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul king of Assyria (that is, Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria), who took the Reubenites, the Gadites

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

and the half-tribe of Manasseh into exile. He took them to Halah, Habor, Hara and the river of Gozan, where they are to this day.

What the kings of Israel failed to see was that civil war with Judah was draining resources and surrounding nations were increasing in strength.

Israel was under constant threat from the kings of Aram led by Hazael and his son, Ben-Hadad. When Hazael became king of Aram he conquered Israel's territory east of the Jordan river. Ben-Hadad's attack was unsuccessful on the occasion mentioned in 1 Kings 20:1, but these attacks showed that neither Israel nor Judah could hold on to the territory David had conquered. Over the 209 years of the Northern Kingdom's existence all David's territory to the north had been lost, although under Jeroboam II some control over it was restored. The kingdom ended when Hoshea's failure to pay tribute to Assyria and his rebellion resulted in the rest of Israel being conquered by Assyria and absorbed into its empire.

Our second landmark reveals that the main cause of this disaster was the collision between the political ambitions of the kings and the clash between true and false religion.

Deuteronomy 32:47 (NIV) They are not just idle words for you—they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.”

Leviticus 26:27-33 (NIV) “If in spite of this you still do not listen to me but continue to be hostile toward me, 28 then in my anger I will be hostile toward you, and I myself will punish you for your sins seven times over.33 I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste, and your cities will lie in ruins.

1 Kings 12:28-29 (NIV) After seeking advice, the king (Jeroboam) made two golden calves. He said to the people, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” 29 One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan.

The 10 tribes refused to listen to God. Although lip service was paid to God, the overwhelming religious ethos of the northern kingdom was apostasy and syncretism – the mixing of the worship of Yahweh with other gods. Jeroboam's first act in establishing the religion of the 10 tribes was to set up two golden calf idols, one at Dan and one at Bethel. This echo of the golden calf incident in the wilderness surely could not have been seen as other than a blatant rejection of God. Blasphemy was also apparent because the golden calf idols were given the credit for the delivery from Egyptian slavery, thus linking God with pagan religious practice.

1 Kings 12:31 (NIV) Jeroboam built shrines on high places and appointed priests from all sorts of people, even though they were not Levites.

1 Kings 13:33-34 (NIV) Even after this, Jeroboam did not change his evil ways, but once more appointed priests for the high places from all sorts of people. Anyone who wanted

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

to become a priest he consecrated for the high places. 34 This was the sin of the house of Jeroboam that led to its downfall and to its destruction from the face of the earth.

Things went from bad to worse. Jeroboam set the tone for the religion of the Northern Kingdom and exacerbated and accelerated the corruption of the priesthood. This indiscriminate appointment of non-Aaronic priests and non-Levitical religious officials sowed the seeds of the destruction of Israel. All that the entire Israelite people had been warned about Canaanite religion was now the common practice of Jeroboam's kingdom. These pagan priests officiated at the high places or locations for worship of the idols of all the foreign gods. Originally these places were legitimate because, apart from Shiloh in the time of Samuel, there was no official central sanctuary. That had changed when David made Jerusalem his capital and brought the Ark of the Covenant there and it had been installed in the temple built by Solomon.

1 Kings 15:26 (NIV) He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the ways of his father and committing the same sin his father had caused Israel to commit.

1 Kings 15:33-34 (NIV)Baasha son of Ahijah became king of all Israel 34 He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the ways of Jeroboam and committing the same sin Jeroboam had caused Israel to commit.

1 Kings 16:25-26 (NIV) But Omri did evil in the eyes of the Lord and sinned more than all those before him. 26 He followed completely the ways of Jeroboam son of Nebat, committing the same sin Jeroboam had caused Israel to commit, so that they aroused the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, by their worthless idols.

1 Kings 16:30-31 (NIV) Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him. 31 He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him.

2 Kings 15:17-18 (NIV) ,,,,, Menahem son of Gadi became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria ten years. 18 He did evil in the eyes of the Lord. During his entire reign he did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit.

By the time of Solomon's death, already illegitimate places of worship and sacrifice sprang up all over the whole of his territory and worship of the gods of the surrounding nations became widespread both in Israel and Judah. The Northern Kingdom, however comes under special condemnation because none of the kings tried to stem the tide of apostasy and idolatry. The sin of Jeroboam became proverbial, his son Nadab was the first of Israel's kings to follow in his footsteps. We will never know what would have happened in the history of God's people if they had followed His command to destroy the Canaanite tribes. What this landmark makes very clear is that a failure to do so led to unmitigated establishment of pagan religious practices in the Northern Kingdom and because of that, it was completely destroyed.

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

The last landmark we see on this stage of our route details the activity of the prophets. It is in this period that prophets become the conscience of the nations of both Israel and Judah. The names of the writing prophets and those of Moses, Samuel, Nathan, Elijah and Elisha are the most well-known prophets in the Old Testament. But others also existed at the time. For example, the passage in 1 Samuel 10:5-6 records how Saul was told he would meet a procession of prophets and would himself be given the Spirit and would be able to do likewise. By the time of Elijah and Elisha there were companies of prophets in various towns across the whole region. Unfortunately, there were also prophets of the pagan gods to as Elijah found in confrontation with Jezebel (1 Kings 18:19). The activity of the prophets of Yahweh, showed that God was doing all He could to call the northern kingdom forsake their rebellion and repent to prevent the retribution from which there would be no restoration for the 10 tribes. God's prophets, in spite of threats to their lives, were a constant reminders to rulers that God's sovereignty alone would determine the fate of the kingdom they ruled. And it is only as we have knowledge of the religious and social conditions that prevailed under the kings, that we get an understanding of what ALL the prophets were talking about. Kings were left in no doubt that the prophets spoke for God regarding their office, their personal conduct and the social and religious regimes they fostered.

Like Samuel before them, three of the prophets Ahijah, Elijah and Elisha were king makers and king breakers.

1 Kings 11:29-31 (NIV) About that time Jeroboam was going out of Jerusalem, and Ahijah the prophet of Shiloh met him on the way, wearing a new cloak. The two of them were alone out in the country, 30 and Ahijah took hold of the new cloak he was wearing and tore it into twelve pieces. 31 Then he said to Jeroboam, "Take ten pieces for yourself, for this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'See, I am going to tear the kingdom out of Solomon's hand and give you ten tribes.

1 Kings 14:7-11 (NIV) Go, tell Jeroboam that this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'I raised you up from among the people and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. 8 I tore the kingdom away from the house of David and gave it to you, but you have not been like my servant David, 9 You have done more evil than all who lived before you. You have made for yourself other gods, idols made of metal; you have aroused my anger and turned your back on me. 10 "Because of this, I am going to bring disaster on the house of Jeroboam. I will cut off from Jeroboam every last male in Israel—slave or free. The Lord has spoken!'

Jeroboam should have known that he owed his kingship to God because of his encounter with Ahijah. He should have realised that his kingship should follow the pattern David had set in terms of religion, but instead acted directly contrary to that standard. When later he sent his wife in disguise to the aged and blind Ahijah to inquire whether his ill son would recover, Ahijah, was forewarned about the deception by God, and gave her this devastating prophecy which also included the prediction of the death of the son as soon as she returned and set foot in the city.

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

The death of Ahab was predicted by the prophet Micaiah (not to be confused with the later prophet Micah).

1 Kings 22:7-8 (NIV) But Jehoshaphat asked, “Is there no longer a prophet of the Lord here whom we can inquire of?” 8 The king of Israel answered Jehoshaphat, “There is still one prophet through whom we can inquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad. He is Micaiah son of Imlah.” “The king should not say such a thing,” Jehoshaphat replied.

1 Kings 22:23 (NIV) “So now the Lord has put a deceiving spirit in the mouths of all these prophets of yours. The Lord has decreed disaster for you.”

1 Kings 22:28 (NIV) Micaiah declared, “If you ever return safely, the Lord has not spoken through me.” Then he added, “Mark my words, all you people!”

1 Kings 22:34 & 37 (NIV) But someone drew his bow at random and hit the king of Israel between the sections of his armour. The king told his chariot driver, “Wheel around and get me out of the fighting. I’ve been wounded.”.... So the king died and was brought to Samaria, and they buried him there.

Chapter 22 of 1 Kings tells of another clash where the true prophet Micaiah is humiliated by being struck on the face and then imprisoned for telling the truth. The occasion was one of the times there was an alliance between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Ahab allied with Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, against Aram. Jehoshaphat insisted on inquiring of a prophet of the Lord before committing his support. In spite of Micaiah’s prediction of disaster for Ahab, the battle went ahead. To try to thwart the prediction, Ahab went into the battle disguised while Jehoshaphat dressed as the king he was. He escaped his pursuers by identifying himself, but Ahab was fatally wounded by a randomly fired arrow. He had failed to heed the words of a true prophet and, at the cost of his life, was deceived by false ones.

And Elisha was indirectly involved in the death of Jezebel through his role in making Jehu king of Israel.

1 Kings 19:15-16 (NIV) The Lord said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. 16 Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet.

2 Kings 9:1-7 (NIV) The prophet Elisha summoned a man from the company of the prophets and said to him, “Tuck your cloak into your belt, take this flask of olive oil with you and go Ramoth Gilead. 2 When you get there, look for Jehu son of Jehoshaphat, the son of Nimshi. Go to him, get him away from his companions and take him into an inner room. 3 Then take the flask and pour the oil on his head and declare, ‘This is what the Lord says: I anoint you king over Israel.’ Then open the door and run; don’t delay!”

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

2 Kings 10:28-30 (NIV) So Jehu destroyed Baal worship in Israel. 29 However, he did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit—the worship of the golden calves at Bethel and Dan. 30 The Lord said to Jehu, “Because you have done well in accomplishing what is right in my eyes and have done to the house of Ahab all I had in mind to do, your descendants will sit on the throne of Israel to the fourth generation.”

There is a bit of confusion between 1 Kings 19:15-16 and 2 Kings 9:1-7. Elijah was told by God to anoint Jehu as king of Israel, yet in the second account it is Elisha who sends a prophet to do so. This can be explained by Elijah being taken up into heaven around 852BC and it was left to his anointed successor to carry out the order 11 years after this event. God’s control of the course of Israel’s history is evident when it is seen that even with a significant delay, what He has purposed did happen. Again, Jehu could not have failed to realise his power came from God and that he had been chosen for a very specific task. He did the right thing in destroying Baal worship in Israel, but still continued to worship the golden calves. And because he obeyed God in relation to his appointed task, God allowed his dynasty to last for 4 generations. As far as the task was concerned specific mention of Jezebel is worth noting. Although by this time Ahab was dead, Jezebel still lived. She is singled out because she had made a policy of killing God’s prophet’s including attempts on Elijah’s life. Jezebel’s humiliating death serves as an example that God did not allow threats against His prophets, or any mistreatment of them, go unavenged.

Kings had no excuse for ignoring the words of God’s prophets because not only did those prophecies come true sometimes in the lifetime of the particular king, but certainly would have been seen to have been fulfilled by those who came after them. Miracles like those of Elisha also attested to the power of God with these men. That kings ignored all the entreaties both to repent and heed warnings of retribution led them towards their inevitable fate.

Spelling out the practical details of what constituted rebellion in God’s eyes, the certainty of retribution, God’s willing forgiveness for repentance, and a restoration to blessing, were the primary messages of the prophets. Their highest priority was the condemnation of the blatant disobedience to the first 4 commandments. This was manifested in nation-wide apostasy and syncretism. Elijah’s confrontation with Jezebel is the most prominent example of the continuous struggle between these laws and the prevailing worship of foreign gods towards the beginning of this period. It was Jezebel who had encouraged the worship of the Sidonian Baal gods in Israel during the reign of Ahab which brought to a head the clash between true and false prophets. But, in spite of the power of God’s intervention, people refused to make the right choice and the religious forms of rebellion became even more marked as time went on.

Hosea’s message to the last kings of Israel was an actual plea from God to turn away from their unfaithfulness which He regarded as adulterous prostitution.

Hosea 4:1-2 (NIV) Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: “There is no faithfulness, no love, no

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

acknowledgment of God in the land. 2 There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.

Hosea 4:6 (NIV) my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. “Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children.

Hosea 4:12 (NIV) My people consult a wooden idol, and a diviner’s rod speaks to them. A spirit of prostitution leads them astray; they are unfaithful to their God.

Hosea 7:10 (NIV) Israel’s arrogance testifies against him, but despite all this he does not return to the Lord his God or search for him.

The example of Hosea’s adulterous marriage to Gomer could not have made God’s position clearer. Israel was guilty of the religious unfaithfulness to God and His ways. Yet God was revealing through the circumstances of Hosea’s life and words that He was willing to show mercy. He was willing to forgive. He did not want to cast aside His people. He wanted them to repent in order to avert the judgement that would come upon them. It was Hosea who had warned that if they sowed the wind they would reap the whirlwind

Failure to comply with the religious tenets of God’s law resulted in total disregard for the laws that were meant to ensure people were treated with justice and righteousness. The incident concerning Naboth’s vineyard in 1 Kings 21 illustrates the abuse of power that prevailed in society. Jezebel engineered Naboth’s death so that Ahab could have the vineyard he coveted. To give Ahab credit he respected Naboth’s refusal to sell because it was obedience to the Mosaic law. But such seizures of land by the rich and powerful, the lack of justice in the courts and the imposition of slavery contravened every law that had been given to ensure people were treated fairly, persisted. The reign of Jeroboam II was the longest and most stable and prosperous period in the history of the Northern kingdom. Yet injustice was making the lives of ordinary people intolerable and it was Amos who exposed these wrongs in the social fabric of the Northern Kingdom

Hosea followed Amos as the prophet to Israel. He prophesied for the last 30 or so years of Israel’s existence and he lived through the captivity and exile of its people. He had tried to show lack of knowledge about God was the root cause of their problems. He had tried to show them the folly of their ingratitude for all God had done for them. He had tried to show them the futility of false religion. And he had tried in vain to show them that while divine judgement was a certainty for unrepentance, restoration to God’s favour was still a promise He would keep if they turned again in obedience to Him.

Tragically our final landmark along this section of route 66 depicts the folly of not listening to God. It shows that nothing will stand in the way of God fulfilling His covenants and bringing His plans and purposes to fruition. Putting faith in kings, in man-made religion governed by apostate priests and false prophets, and ignoring the true word of God is the greatest deception facing the human race. The Assyrian deportations and then total conquest of the Northern Kingdom brought about its destruction. The map shows the extent to which

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

the 10 tribes were scattered throughout the Assyrian empire. They were progressively assimilated among those peoples. In addition, peoples from those territories moved into the territory of Israel, with the result that it could no longer be regarded as belonging to any Israelite. The ten tribes who had followed Jeroboam and the territory he had ruled disappeared permanently from history.

Only Judah remained of David's empire as the representative of God's chosen people. This is a part of our route that we leave with a feeling of sadness, for the land and its people. For 209 years there were so many opportunities to get into right standing with God before He brought about the disaster He had spoken through Moses and the prophet Ahijah to Jeroboam who had established the Northern Kingdom.

As we do a U-turn and head back to the Southern Kingdom of Judah, we will see if it had learned lessons from its sister kingdom's mistakes.