

2ND KINGS

Week 26, Chapters 17 and 18

As we resume our study of 2nd Kings, let's review. We are in chapter 17, at the time when the northern kingdom called itself Israel, and alternately Ephraim; the kingdom that was begun by Jeroboam after Solomon's death, had just come to an end. To the south of Israel lay Judah, which was still being ruled by the royal descendants of King David.

The northern kingdom is usually said to be the territory of the 10 tribes (that eventually gave way to the legend of the 10 LOST tribes). But in fact it consisted of 7 tribes, plus about ½ of the clans of Manessah. We get to the number of 10 when we add in some other Israelite tribes that lived on the east side of the Jordan River; the tribes of Gad, Reuben, and the other ½ of the tribe of Manessah. These 2 ½ tribes (as they are usually called) were not actually part of the northern kingdom, but they did firmly ally and identify themselves with the northern kingdom. Thus even foreign nations of that era saw the Trans-Jordanian Israelite tribes as being part of the northern kingdom of Israel. And this explains why when Hoshea, the latest (and what would prove to be the last and final) King of Israel rebelled against his master Assyria, and King Shalmaneser of Assyria attacked Israel in response, it was those 2 ½ tribes on the east bank of the Jordan River that he attacked and conquered first.

So the northern kingdom was no more; the 10 tribes were sent to far flung settlements in the vast Assyrian Empire, and after some years passed settlers from various other conquered nations were sent to the former Israelite territory to repopulate it. This was the way that Assyria controlled its empire; it broke down the social fabric of nations and kingdoms it overran by deporting the bulk of the indigenous population and bringing in other peoples from other lands. It was a kind of geopolitical musical chairs, and truth be told this system worked quite well in keeping the citizens of Assyria quiet and unable to fight back.

Judah found itself unconquered but dependent upon the imperial power of Assyria; this had been agreed to by King **Achaz** of Judah in exchange for his retaining his throne. The usual vassal arrangement was made whereby **Achaz** was subservient to the King of Assyria and Judah was required to send regular shipments of tribute to Assyria in order to maintain the arrangement. Not only did this severely damage Judah's economy, but it was a great shame upon the Jews of Judah to be under the control of a heathen authority.

Let's re-read a portion of 2nd Kings 17 to establish our basis for today's lesson.

RE-READ 2ND KINGS CHAPTER 17:24 – end

In verse 24 we get an abbreviated record of some of the people who were sent to Israel to repopulate it. We're going to see that rather than call the area of repopulation Israel or the northern kingdom the ancient editor of 2nd Kings uses the term Samaria. While the City of Samaria had been the capital city of the northern kingdom of Israel, since the exile of the 10 tribes the term Samaria came to be used to describe the general region that extended for many miles in all directions from the City of Samaria. By Yeshua's day, some 700 years later, Samaria was still a prominent name and it was even adopted by the Roman Empire as the name for one of the provinces of the former Holy Land, which it now controlled. And, by the way, just to confuse things a bit, somehow when Bible translators translated to English the Hebrew term for the people who inhabited Samaria, a "t" got added. And the result was that the English Bible calls these people Samaritans, instead of Samaritans. Thus in the famous Biblical story of the Good Samaritan, it really ought to be called the Good Samaritan. A Samaritan and a Samaritan then are same the thing; residents of Samaria.

We need to note that there is a significant time lag between the end of verse 23 and the start of verse 24; several years actually. How many years is difficult to ascertain, but probably around a decade. One must understand that even though the accepted date of the conquering and exile of the northern kingdom is 722 or 723 B.C., that does not mean that all the Hebrews were expelled and sent to the Assyrian Empire at the same time. They were sent away in groups, over a period of several years. So there was not a mass overnight exodus (like when the Hebrews left Egypt), but rather it was like a balloon slowly deflating. The Hebrew population decreased steadily, and then at some point the Assyrian authorities decided it was time to start bringing some colonists in from other conquered territories to make good use of the former Israelite kingdom.

By now, King Shalmaneser of Assyria who had conquered Israel was dead and the new king was Esarhaddon; and it was during Esarhaddon's administration that foreigners from Babylon, Cutha, Ava, Hamath, and Sepharvaim were forcibly moved from their home nations to the territory of Samaria.

Briefly: the name Babylon is referring to the Kingdom not the City of Babylon. Cutha was a tiny nation that lay about 15 miles northeast of the City of Babylon. Ava was a city on the Euphrates River that was near a place called Chabor. Hamath is in Syria, and Sepharvaim is Sippora. Sepharvaim is a plural word and it means two cities or twin cities. Indeed Sippora, the southernmost city of Mesopotamia, occupied both banks of the Euphrates River. It was generally people from these places that were sent to occupy the region of Samaria.

But what we find in verse 25 is that naturally these people brought their gods and god-systems with them to Samaria. As inflexible as Assyria was about deporting people from their

homelands, their policy was to be tolerant in allowing people to retain the worship of their national gods. The Assyrian religion was not forced upon them. Thus we are told that they did not fear Yehoveh.

This is good place to pause and explain a phrase that we hear over and over especially in the Old Testament, and that phrase is to “fear” one god or another. In Hebrew the word is **yare**. And while the English translation to the word “fear” is not wrong, it has to be taken in the Old English sense and not in the modern English sense. That is, to fear a king or a god meant to show respect and reverence. Thus, in modern Christian-eze, we could rightly say that to “fear a god” generally means to worship that god and observe that god’s rules and regulations. This was not about being scared of that god, or walking around in terror of that god. That said, ancient Middle Eastern societies firmly believed in these gods and were indeed leery of them because everyone knew that a god or a goddess who took a dislike to you could cause you a lot of trouble and discomfort.

So when we are told that these new colonists in Samaria didn’t fear the God of Israel, it simply means that they didn’t show Him respect by worshipping Him as they did many other gods. But they did fully accept the universally held belief of that era that all nations and kingdoms had their own territorial gods. Thus when lions began attacking the new settlers of Samaria, of course saw this as an act of vengeance from the local deity; a deity that they knew nothing about.

And in fact, they were right; it was Yehoveh who allowed the growing lion population to attack the new folks. While we’re talking about lions, let me point out that at one time indeed the entire region of Canaan was lion territory. Lions were always a problem for the Israelites; however as the Hebrew population grew and settled in villages and cities, the lion habitat was encroached upon, lions were hunted and killed, and so the lion population was greatly diminished. But since the exile of the 10 tribes, the lion population became less threatened by its only real predator, humans, and so the number of lions went through an explosive growth period.

The settlers figured that the problem was that they weren’t worshipping the god of the land of Samaria, but that was because they didn’t know how (they didn’t know anything about Yehoveh). So Esarhaddon agreed to return one of the exiled Hebrew priests to Samaria so that he could teach the people how to worship this unknown god. Notice how verse 28 explains that this Hebrew priest went to live in Beit-El. Beit-El was one of the two cult cities of the religion of the northern kingdom as established by King Jeroboam late in the 900’s B.C., the other cult site being in the northern city of Dan. What we need to grasp is that although this priest was a Hebrew, he was not a Levite priest. Rather this was one of the priests of the Golden Calf cult. Recall that King Jeroboam had 2 Golden Calf images built and then he declared that these were images of Yehoveh God of Israel. So since more than 2 centuries had passed since the people of the northern kingdom had begun worshipping the Golden

Calves as the God of Israel, it was assumed by all the surrounding foreign nations that this was the legitimate religion of the Hebrews. It is not unlike how many people around the world in our day who are Muslim, or Buddhist or Hindu see Catholicism and the Pope as representative of all Christianity.

So while on the surface it seems like a pretty good thing that a Hebrew Priest would be given the mission of teaching the new foreign colonists of Samaria about the God of Israel, in fact what he taught them was the apostate religion of Jeroboam: the Golden Calf religion. And the result is what one might expect; since a Golden Calf image was used as a supposedly legitimate idol of Yehoveh, the foreign settlers worshipped it as well as images of their own gods that they had brought with them. And there is no evidence that the Hebrew priest of Beit-El discouraged them from doing so since that was essentially the way the system had worked for the 10 northern tribes anyway.

So the settlers re-used the high places that the people of the northern tribes had built, and worshipped their various gods there. We're told that the Babylonians made Succoth-B'not. While some Bibles imply that Succoth-B'not is a god, in fact there is no ancient evidence of any god of that name. Further, in Hebrew that phrase means something like booths of the daughters. Many reliable archaeologists and Assyriologists think that what this is indicating is not the name of a god, but rather that structures called Succoth-B'not were built to house the idol of a god or goddess. And their best guess is that since it was a god worshipped by "daughters" (females) that the god was likely Ashtoreth, the goddess of fertility.

The settlers from Cutha made Nergal, the Babylonian god of the plague and lord of the underworld (land of the dead), so it was a religion in honor of a death cult. The Syrians from Hamath made Ashima, and the ancient Rabbis say that this was a god represented by a male goat. The people from Ava worshipped Nivchaz and Tartak; Nivchaz was the form of a dog, and Tartak the form of a donkey. But the worst of all was the deity of the people from Sepharvaim who sacrificed their children as burnt offerings to gods called Adramelech and Anamelech.

Verses 32 and 33 explain that they appointed priests from among themselves to do their sacrificing for them at these many high places, and at the same time they worshipped Yehoveh God of Israel. The editor of 2nd Kings explains in verse 34 that still in his time the colonists behave this way. They do the rituals that the Hebrew priest of the Golden Calf cult taught them, but they don't follow the ways of the Torah and God's commandments. That sounds confusing if not contradictory until one understands the history of the Samaritans.

From here forward to the end of the chapter we get statements from the Lord admonishing these people for NOT following His laws and commandments and for their worshipping other gods instead of worshipping Him and Him alone. He reminds them that they were under the

covenant God made with them, and that covenant prohibited them from worshipping other gods.

But here's the thing: I thought the people who were doing all of the mixed worship were gentile settlers, forcibly brought to Samaria by Assyria's King? Why would God say that these people had been "covenant people" and now they weren't obeying the covenant? The answer is this: there was a remaining remnant of the 10 tribes still living in Samaria, and they readily mixed themselves with these foreign colonists. These Israelites became racially, ethnically, and spiritually mixed with gentiles. We know that even in Jesus' day, many Samaritans insisted that they were Israelites, despite their abhorrent religious beliefs and worship practices. This is why we are told in the New Testament that Samaritans (Samaritans) were despised by the Jews (and the Galileans for that matter). The Samaritans were a mixed breed, dating back to the time we are reading about in 2nd Kings 17. But what galled the Galileans and the Judeans to the point of hatred was that these Samaritans claimed to be legitimate Hebrews and that the perverted religion they practiced was the real and legitimate Hebrew religion (as opposed to the one practiced in Jerusalem at the Holy Temple).

I would like to hold this up as a good (though not precise) illustration of where the ekklesia of Christ has arrived in the 21st Century A.D. The bulk of Christianity (as did the Samaritans) completely denies the Torah of God, denies that Israel is God's covenant people, and denies that God's laws and commandments are relevant to us. Further, there is an implied if not outright defined church doctrine that says that the God of the OT and of the Hebrews is a fundamentally different God than the God of the NT and of the gentiles. We have, as did the Samaritans, abandoned God's observances and appointed times such as Sabbath and His 7 Biblical Feasts and created new ones that were born of pagan cults and practices. It is common for laymen and church authorities to admit that while it is historically undeniable that things like bunnies and fir trees were the core of heathen worship rituals, nowhere present in the Biblical worship, and in fact were expressly prohibited by the Law of Moses, that by incorporating those same things in our worship and observances we have cleansed them and Christianized them in the name of Jesus.

That is what the Hebrews of Jeroboam's Golden Calf cult claimed, and it's what the Samaritans claimed. And God judged them terribly for it. Wake up church! We are in great danger, and cannot be in God's will when we follow those same ways for no other reason than we like them, and because those customs have become imbedded in our society and our family. To say they are harmless and just for fun, or that God is love so He understands, might satisfy our desire to rationalize the truth and therefore not have to face a change. But the Lord despises those things and there will be a price to pay, Christian or not. If Yehoveh was willing to exile His own chosen people, and cause them to suffer greatly for their apostasy, why would we think that we will get a pass for behaving essentially the same?

Let's move on to 2nd Kings 18.

READ 2ND KINGS 18 all

The past several chapters have alternated between focusing on the northern kingdom, and then on the southern kingdom. That more or less comes to an end with chapter 18 because the northern kingdom has succumbed to its apostasy and unfaithfulness to the Lord and been exiled to Assyria. All that remains of the Hebrews living in the Promised Land is Judah. But they are living there on borrowed time and under the thumb of the King of Assyria as a vassal state.

The chapter opens by explaining that Judah has just crowned a new king, Hezekiah, son of **Achaz**. And in the usual means of synchronizing the reigns of the kings of Israel with the kings of Judah, we are told that **Hizkiyahu** began his reign over Judah in the 3rd year that Hoshea was king of Israel.

Hizkiyahu means “strength of God”, and it is a most appropriate name for this reformer. Hezekiah quickly proved to be the antithesis of his father **Achaz**. 25 years old when he took the throne, Hezekiah proved to be a righteous king and would do all he could to right the wrongs of his apostate predecessor. He ruled for 29 years.

Hezekiah was a throwback from the recent long line of wicked kings, and compares favorably with his ancestor King David. What made David so great in God’s eyes was certainly not a lack of sinful behavior; rather it was his determination to resist idolatry. David did not permit idol worship in his kingdom, nor did he worship other gods himself. **Hizkiyahu** was cut from the same mold; he was not perfect, and would succumb to some of his fears. But he resisted worshipping other gods or tolerating it in his kingdom.

It is difficult to find a more striking contrast between a son and his father than between Hezekiah and **Achaz**. Recall that **Achaz** was a blasphemous king that openly denied the sovereignty of Yehoveh. Perhaps the most defining of the several moments of apostasy that **Achaz** committed is recorded in Isaiah 7. Let’s go there now for a refresher.

READ ISAIAH 7:3 – 10

The situation was that King **Achaz** and Judah were under threat of attack from Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel who were allies at the time. And together they were fully capable of doing what they said they’d do: tear Judah apart and divide it between themselves. **Achaz** was trying to decide what to do, and had determined that he would go to Assyria for help. But the

Lord sent the Prophet Isaiah to **Achaz** with a message of mercy and deliverance: the Lord Himself would intervene and stop the evil alliance from succeeding in their plans to destroy Judah and depose **Achaz**.

But when God wanted an acknowledgment from **Achaz** that he would choose the path of relying on Yehoveh for the salvation of Judah, **Achaz** flatly refused. As is stated in Isaiah 7 verses 10 and 11:

CJB Isaiah 7:10-12

¹⁰ **ADONAI spoke again to Achaz; he said,**

¹¹ **"Ask ADONAI your God to give you a sign. Ask it anywhere, from the depths of Sh'ol to the heights above."**

¹² **But Achaz answered, "I won't ask, I won't test ADONAI."**

King **Achaz** had a stark choice sitting before him: submit to YHWH and be saved by the power and Word of God, or 2) submit to heathen Assyria and be subjugated. 2nd Kings 16 records that his choice was an irrational refusal to accept God's offer of mercy and instead went to an enemy for help.

CJB 2Kings 16:7-8

⁷ **Then Achaz sent messengers to Tiglat-Pil'eser king of Ashur with this message: "I am your servant and your son. Come up, and save me from the king of Aram and the king of Isra'el, who are attacking me."**

⁸ **Achaz took the silver and gold that was in the house of ADONAI and in the treasuries of the royal palace and sent it as a present to the king of Ashur.**

The result was that Assyria accepted **Achaz's** offer of putting Judah under Assyria's control; and Assyria indeed attacked Syria on Judah's behalf and this stopped the attack on Judah in its tracks. But the consequences for Judah for rejecting God and creating this unholy alliance were, especially on a spiritual level, catastrophic.

But now several years later, in His mercy, God raised up a good king for Judah: **Hizkiyahu**. And we read in 2nd Kings 18:4 that in addition to removing all the high places around Judah where improper worship took place, he also had all the pagan religious pillars and Asherah trees cut down. But then we hear that he also destroyed the ancient pole with the bronze serpent on it that Moses had constructed at least 600 years earlier, out in the wilderness. Why would Hezekiah destroy such a sacred object to the Israelites? One that the Lord Himself ordered constructed to counteract a plague of snakebites?

First it is surprising to learn that some of those wandering Israelites had apparently carried that pole around with them long after its purpose was finished. Second is that what is more surprising is that they had given the pole a name, **N'chushtan**, and had begun praying to it and worshipping it as an idol. However it is equally clear that they didn't worship it as an alternative god, but rather as an object holy to the God of Israel. Is that so wrong?

What a great object lesson there is here. The Bible lists many objects in it that both Christians and Jews have taken beyond their intent, purpose, and status. Saint Christopher's medals; statues of Mary and Jesus; and perhaps even Calvary's Cross. It goes to show that just because God creates an object for a purpose, or a common object gets used for a divine purpose, does not render the object itself divine, nor does it indicate that the object has inherent and independent power of its own. The pole with the brazen serpent was intended by Yehoveh for a one-time only use; but many Hebrews decided that the results were so stunning that it had a kind of magic power within it, and that the pole upon which hung the healing serpent was a divine image, or even itself intrinsically divine. So they kept it generation after generation, and they worshipped before it.

Practically every Christian commentator compares Christ's Cross with the pole where the serpent hung; in fact Messiah Yeshua did it, too! Everyone who is saved on account of Jesus knows of John 3:16: **For God so loved the world that he gave his only and unique Son, so that everyone who trusts in him may have eternal life, instead of being utterly destroyed.** However what Yeshua said in conjunction with this statement, only 2 verses earlier also ought to be seared into our minds:

CJB John 3:14-15

¹⁴ Just as Moshe lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up;

¹⁵ so that everyone who trusts in him may have eternal life.

Jesus Christ made His own comparison between the bronze serpent and its wooden pole, and the wooden pole that He would be lifted up on (the cross of crucifixion). And He certainly didn't

do so in a negative fashion. But I wonder what He will say when He returns and points out that the device of His execution has become the chief symbol of our faith in Him in both Orthodox and Evangelical Christianity? What must he think as He finds people praying at the foot of the pole (the cross), or using them in exorcisms, or wearing them around our necks as ornaments, or for good luck charms, or as jewel encrusted status symbols?

I'm not saying that any of these things necessarily amounts to worshipping the Cross; but I've been to some congregations that openly do. The story of Hezekiah righteously and appropriately destroying the pole and the bronze serpent was not because the Israelites kept it as a remembrance of what happened in the wilderness; it was because over time the pole and the bronze serpent had become important objects of worship. This needs to be a flashing yellow light of caution for modern Believers because it is an excruciatingly short and dangerous leap from possessing, admiring, and looking upon an endearing object that reminds us of our faith and our God, to using it as the **object** of our faith. When that line becomes blurred, the Lord calls it called idolatry.

We'll continue chapter 18 next time.