

## LESSON 1: PROPHETS AND PROPHECY

### The Kingdom Divides

Upon the reign of King Solomon, the twelve tribes which made up the nation had been under one king and tribal loyalties were still strong. Solomon was a powerful ruler, but he taxed the people heavily and forced them to work as slaves for the building project. The ten northern tribes suspected that they were being taxed more than the two southern tribes.

So when Solomon died about 931 BC, his son Rehoboam was to be crowned King. But the leaders of ten northern tribes promised to support Rehoboam only if he lightened the taxes and forced-labour policies. Rehoboam reacted harshly to this revolt, promising to make his policies stiffer than that of Solomon. The ten northern tribes reacted swiftly. Uniting under a leader named Joeroboam, they revolted and broke with the southern tribes. The kingdom split into two nations - **Judah in the south** with *Jerusalem* as its capital and **Israel in the north** with *Samaria* as its capital.



## **The Religion Declines**

After the division of the kingdom, the relationship between the two nations varied, sometimes getting into even outright war between them. On the level of religion, there came up an added difficulty. During the reign of Solomon, all Hebrews worshipped in the great Temple in Jerusalem. However, Jerusalem was now in the southern kingdom. So the northern tribes set up separate shrines at opposite ends of the kingdom, Dan and Bethel, so they would not have to go to Jerusalem. In these two shrines, they set up golden bulls to represent God. Slowly this deteriorated into the worship of Baals, specially at the time of king Ahab who married Jezebel from Phoenicia, hoping to have Phoenicia's support in defending Israel against Syria. But Ahab was a weak king. Jezebel was a strong and cruel woman and she fostered the worship of her god Baal, together with all the rituals, including sacrifices of children. Ahab thus forgot his allegiance to Yahweh. He allowed Jezebel to bring from Phoenicia, 450 prophets of Baal and began to persecute the worshippers of Yahweh.

## **Elijah Begins His Challenge**

An unexpected and dramatic challenge to Jezebel's authority came from the great prophet Elijah. He was not going to stand by and see Israel forsake God. Though he knew that to challenge the queen meant sure death, he was not afraid. He prophesied in the name of Yahweh and told Ahab that as punishment for the growing cult of Baal worship in his country, God was sending a disastrous drought in Israel. The drought was very severe. Elijah himself was saved by God who asked him to move into the desert where he survived on food dropped by ravens. Then Elijah was sent by God outside the borders of Israel to the town of Zarephath in Phoenicia. There a poor widow fed him with the last little grain that she was preparing for her son and herself. When Elijah ate of it, the widow's small store of food did not finish. Later Elijah miraculously saved her son from a mortal illness. God cared for Elijah, whom he had chosen.

## **Significance of These Events**

It is a clear warning to the people as to what happens to us when we forsake God. Solomon, in spite of his greatness, forgot the Lord towards the end of his reign; the kingdom could no longer remain united. Successive kings in Israel did not learn the lesson and continued to pay a deaf ear to God, bringing in the god Baal as a substitute.

We also see how God, out of the love He has for his people, arouses the spirits of certain persons to speak out His message and warn the people about the dangers of forgetting their covenant with Him. Such persons are specially blessed and strengthened by Him to speak His mind out even at the risk of their own lives. We see prophets like Elijah, who **'stand for God'**.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Do we have the spirit of Elijah - his zeal for God's people to remain faithful and loyal?
2. Are we prepared to stake everything for the sake of our faith and religious principles?

## A HYMN FOR REFLECTION

### CHORUS:

It takes courage to answer a call,  
It takes courage to give your all,  
It takes courage to risk your name  
It takes courage to be true,

1. It takes courage to dare  
What no other will share,  
To be standing alone,  
One, whom no one will own,  
To be ready to stake  
for another man's sake.  
It takes courage to be true.
2. It takes courage to say  
What you know will not pay.  
To give each one his share  
Though there'll be less to spare.  
To be seeking no more  
Than the neighbour next door.  
It takes courage to be true.
3. It takes courage to leave  
What good fortune can give,  
And to go to a land  
Where the poor need a hand;  
To be spending one's days  
In less leisurely ways.  
It takes courage to be true.