

CHAPTER VIII

ISRAEL

By the year 922 B.C.E., the royal government which David had so efficiently organized and which Solomon had inherited lay in chaos. The people who had traveled from Dan to Beersheba knowing that it was their "Promised Land" met with distrustful glances from tribesmen whom they had called "brother."

The books of First and Second Kings intertwine the history of the Northern and Southern kingdoms. (They were originally written as one book. When it was translated into Greek it was split into two.) They took the names of Israel and Judah. For simplicity we will first look at the shorter record of Israel.

One might have expected the kingdom of Israel to be the more enduring of the two. The ten rebellious tribes comprised twice the population and nearly three times as much territory as Judah. Furthermore their land consisted of gentler hills and more fertile valleys with far more rainfall than the austere, dry ridges of their sister kingdom. But Israel lay across the trade routes of the Near East. The busy highway wrapped the inhabitants in foreign cultures from all directions. It ran from Egypt north along the Mediterranean coast, turned east past Megiddo, then north to Tyre, Damascus and Mesopotamia. Rugged Israelite individualism lacked the stability of unified worship which the temple at Jerusalem offered. This led to stormy politics of greed and intrigue. In two hundred years Israel's course would be run. Nineteen kings, representing nine families, would hold the throne. Eight rulers would die violent deaths.

Yet amid the tumult Israel would provide the setting for one of the foremost guides in the history of the children of Israel - the prophet Elijah. He would advance Moses' insight of Creative Existence to a dawning understanding of man's relationship to his Creator. His gentle servant Elisha would devote his life to exemplifying and teaching his master's great discovery. This would be the beginning of the important new era of Writing Prophets.

The kings had dropped the work of the Lord. The prophets stepped forward to carry on.

JEROBOAM

Ahijah the prophet met Jeroboam in the field. He assuring him that he would be king over the ten tribes. He gave him a message from the Lord:

It shall be, if thou wilt hearken unto all that I command thee, and wilt walk in my ways,...as David my servant did; that I will be with thee, and build thee a sure house, as I built for David, and will give Israel unto thee. (I Kings 11:38)

However, Jeroboam chose to protect his new throne by his own means rather than by obedience to God. He was fully aware of the influence of the temple in Jerusalem which sheltered the sacred ark. He took shrewd steps to keep his subjects home. He set up two bronze calves with their altars. One was at Dan in the North. The other was at the ancient shrine at Bethel. This was near his Southern border roughly seventeen kilometers from Jerusalem. Professing to be restoring the true religion of the wilderness he proclaimed:

Behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the
land of Egypt. (I Kings 12:28; Exodus 32:8)

Quite possibly the calves were intended to serve the same purpose as the cherubim in Jerusalem, with the glory of Israel's invisible God above them. However the likeness to Baal worship was so close that Baal and Jehovah would soon become confused in the minds of the common people.

Jeroboam also changed the feast days to fall on different dates from those in Judah. Since the orthodox priests had fled to Judah, he appointed shrine attendants who were not qualified according to the temple traditions.

For this wickedness that "caused all Israel to sin," Ahijah the prophet cursed Jeroboam and his family and all Israel:

For the Lord shall smite Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water,
and he shall root up Israel out of this good land,... and shall scatter
them beyond the river,... (I Kings 14:15)

The curse on his family was fulfilled. His son Nadab and all his house were murdered by Baasha, of the tribe of Issachar. Even the pretense of divine appointment gave way to a rush of greed for power. Baasha's son reigned ingloriously and was murdered, while he was drinking among his officers, by a chariot captain of no ability whatever. This man reigned for a week, then cremated himself in the royal palace when defeat became inevitable.

After less than fifty years the Kingdom of Israel lay in chaos.

OMRI

At that point the army took over and proclaimed their own trusted commander, Omri, king over Israel. Five years Israel struggled in the throes of civil war. At last Omri and the army emerged triumphant.

Omri proved to be a mighty military and diplomatic figure during his short reign. He brought back to Israel some of the respect from foreign nations which had vanished

after Solomon's death. The black basalt "Moab stone" (now in the Louvre museum) confesses that King Misha of Moab was humbled by him "for many days." In Assyrian records Israel was known as "the land of Omri" for decades after his death.

Unfortunately diplomatic skill entailed recognition of foreign gods. This led to disloyalty to the God of Israel. The court recorders refused him a prominent place in their records. Only one of his many contributions to his country's stability are mentioned, the building of the city of Samaria. It was strategically located on a hillside overlooking the valley whose Eastern end was guarded by Shechem. Samaria became the capital of Israel and the most formidably fortified city in all the land.

When Omri died his son Ahab became king. The worship of God came nearly to a halt. To strengthen a commercial treaty with the Phoenician seaport of Sidon, Omri had married Ahab to a princess of that sophisticated city, named Jezebel. (Her name lives in our language today, denoting a ruthless and wicked woman.) She swept into Samaria with a retinue of several hundred priests of Baal and of the fertility goddess Ashera. She was intent on wiping out the worship of Israel's austere God. Israelite priests were forced to go underground, hiding in caves or fleeing to Judah. Ahab meekly built a temple and altar to the Phoenician Baal-Melqart in the new city and turned to pagan worship himself. The royal and religious leader of Israel turned his back on Israel's God.

ELIJAH

Into this crisis of religious fear and confusion stepped one of the most dramatic and progressive figures of the Old Testament -- Elijah the Tishbite.

Our meager knowledge of him makes Elijah seem almost eccentric. There is scarcely any identity other than a few abruptly told episodes in our Bible. The fact that he is considered by many as second only to Moses, and that the author assumes that we know Elijah's ancestry, suggest that a rich legacy of information concerning him has been lost.

Elijah was the forerunner of a new and higher prophetic order. In the previous decades prophets had learned to teach and advise cautiously. This was done in order to retain the approval of their royal patrons. Elijah introduced a new, strong class of prophets. They would pick up the torch of allegiance to Israel's God and carry it to new heights of understanding. They made no special consideration to the kings.

Elijah was a vigorous, austere man. He was sincere, deeply compassionate, with a profound faith in the all-power of God. The increase of Baal worship in Samaria, and its injustice to the poor, distressed him. He left his simple life in Gilead to oppose the brutal cult. Clad in a rough cloak he suddenly and boldly confronted Ahab, king of Israel, with the ominous statement,

...As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word.
(I Kings 17:1)

This word is, as always, not a foretelling but a doing. Baal, pagan god of storm and agriculture, would be helpless.

As the fields became parched and barren Ahab sent scouts throughout the land in search of the strange, intense prophet. Elijah was hiding for his life in the gorge of the brook Cherith. There ravens brought him food. Eventually the brook dried up.

And the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, Arise, get thee to Zarephath which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee. (I Kings 17:8,9)

Zidon (Sidon) was Jezebel's own homeland. It was in the very midst of Baal. Nevertheless Elijah obediently made the long journey to Zarephath.

And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, the widow woman was there gathering of sticks: and he called to her, and said, Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel that I may drink. And as she was going to fetch it, he called to her, and said, Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand. And she said, As the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and, behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son that we may eat it, and die. And Elijah said unto her, Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son. For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth. (I Kings 17:10-14)

Here was a duet of courage! Elijah, hunted and in enemy territory, dared to offer this woman his own faith in the God of Israel. The gentle pagan widow chose to feed this stranger rather than herself and son. The story gives no details, only that Elijah's faith was vindicated. Courage and love bore fruit and "she, and he, and her house did eat many days."

Some time later the widow came to Elijah distraught with grief. Her son had fallen sick and died. Elijah took the lad in his arms. This was a boy with whom he had doubtless spent much time with in the past weeks. He carried him up to his own room and laid him on the bed. From the depths of his sense of justice and mercy, contrary to the general belief that all things, good or bad, express the will of God, he cried out in fierce denial and disbelief:

O Lord my God, hast thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son? (I Kings 17:20)

Then, with renewed confidence in God's unalterable goodness, he prayed again:

O Lord my God, I pray thee, let this child's soul come into him again. (I Kings 17:21)

The child revived. We can imagine the joy and tenderness in Elijah's voice as he said to the widow, "See, thy son liveth."

THE CONTEST

In the third year of drought the word of the Lord came at last to Elijah,

Go, shew thyself unto Ahab; and I will send rain upon the earth. (I Kings 18:1)

Ahab and Obadiah, the governor of his house, were tramping through the parched land in search of grass in order to save some of their animals. Through Obadiah, Elijah summoned the king to meet him. As one having authority he ordered Ahab to call Israel together at Mount Carmel. He also ordered that Ahab gather the prophets of Baal and Asherah. When the people were assembled Elijah strode before them and cried,

How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word. (I Kings 18:21)

To awaken them Elijah proposed a contest between Baal and the God of Israel. Baal's many prophets would build an altar, place the firewood on it with the sacrificial bull but put no fire under it. Then Elijah, lone prophet of the God of Israel, would do the same. The God that answered with fire (the universally understood sign of the divine presence) would be recognized as the true God. The people agreed, "It is well spoken."

The pagan prophets prepared their altar. All day they danced and leaped before it beneath the glaring sun. They cut themselves until the blood ran down to make the magic more potent. They cried out "O Baal, hear us!" There was no answer.

At the time of evening sacrifice Elijah approached the long-abandoned altar of the Lord. He was confident that his actions were in obedience to God. With twelve stones for the twelve tribes of Israel he repaired the altar. The wood was arranged and the sacrificial bullock was put on it. Then he ordered twelve barrels of precious water to be poured over the wood and in a trench around the base of the altar. He cried out before all the people:

...Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the Lord God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again. Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The Lord, he is the God; the Lord, he is the God. (I Kings 18:36-39)

The contest proved not that Israel's God was more powerful than Baal but that the gods of Tyre and the Canaanites had no existence at all. At Elijah's command the pagan prophets were seized and slain. It was essential to remove from Israel the teachers of falsehood.

Elijah withdrew from the crowd to climb to the mountaintop where he knelt, waiting beneath the cloudless sky for the promised rain. At last the storm clouds boiled up black in the west. He hurried to Ahab as a humble servant to his reformed king. He ran before the royal chariot as they fled from the drenching rain.

THE STILL SMALL VOICE

Elijah's triumph was short-lived. Jezebel was furious at the slaughter of her prophets. She vowed to kill him. No one dared stand against her. Once more Elijah took flight.

Emotionally exhausted he turned his lonely footsteps southward. He traveled down the desolate paths of the Negeb to Mount Horeb which is Mount Sinai. There on the slopes some four hundred years before Moses had received guidance and the revelation of I AM. Elijah climbed the mountain in the majestic silence. The word of God came to him where he stood at the mouth of a cave:

Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. (I Kings 19:11,12)

It was not in the dramatic and boisterous acts of nature but in the individual, quiet awareness of the divine Presence that the true God of Israel was found. Hereafter the faithful prophets of Israel would stress the need for personal righteousness and consecration rather than mighty displays and mass allegiance to rituals.

POLITICS

In the stillness and solitude of Mount Horeb Elijah listening for the word of God. He studied the trend of Israel's affairs. In the time of the judges the miseries of persecution had repeatedly turned the children of Israel back to their fathers' God. Now action lay only in the hands of the king and under the growing snobbery of aristocracy royal families. Even enemies were kindred spirits and the people, pawns. Elijah must approach his task through politics, foreign and domestic, and the plan he evolved was fourfold.

In Syria to the North the royal family of Benhadad must be replaced by a man of humbler origin, the servant Hazael. In Israel the corruption of the house of Ahab must be excised. To give continuity to his long-range mission Elijah must have an apprentice: Elisha the son of Shaphat. Together they must find and train the many steadfast Israelites who had never bowed to Baal. Refreshed and encouraged with a view of his purpose Elijah strode boldly back to Samaria.

He found Elisha toiling on his farm. Elisha contrast greatly with the man he was destined to serve. Elisha was a wealthy man. Twelve oxen made up his team. He loved music, friends and the finer life of the city. Nevertheless, when Elijah threw his cloak over him (a call to apprenticeship) Elisha joyfully followed to serve him. He exemplified his teaching all the rest of his life. With his help Elijah reinstated the schools of prophets. They were later known as "the sons of the prophets."

The foundation for reform was established.

WAR WITH SYRIA

The king of Syria, Benhadad, summoned thirty-two kings to his assistance. With this impressive force he marched down upon Samaria. Messengers brought his harsh demands to Ahab in the besieged city:

Thy silver and thy gold is mine; thy wives also, and thy children, even the goodliest, are mine. And the King of Israel answered and said, My lord, O king, according to thy saying, I am thine, and all that I have. (I Kings 20:3,4)

The messengers came again with further extreme claims. Benhadad's servants must be permitted to ransack the houses of King Ahab taking whatever they wished. This was too much! "All the elders and all the people" counseled Ahab to resist. An unnamed prophet promised that the Lord would give Israel the victory, that the hand of God might be recognized.

Ahab led his brave little army out against the mighty host. The thirty-two kings were drinking in their elegant pavilions. The drunken Benhadad ordered his soldiers to take the Israelites alive. Ahab's men slew "every one his man." The confused Syrians fled in utter route.

Benhadad's defeated officers explained to him that Israel's gods were gods of the hills. Let the next battle be fought in the plains and they would be helpless. So the following spring the Syrians swept down in tremendous numbers. They demolished villages and trampled the fields.

And there came a man of God, and spake unto the king of Israel, and said, Thus saith the Lord, Because the Syrians have said, the Lord is God of the hills, but he is not God of the valleys, therefore will I deliver all this great multitude into thine hand, and ye shall know that I am the Lord. (I Kings 20:28)

The Israelites in their camps seemed like two little flocks of kids against the sea of enemy tents. Nevertheless the Syrian army was utterly cut to pieces that day. Benhadad fell into the hands of Ahab.

Then the king of Israel forgot the suffering his impoverished subjects had endured. He hailed the royal Benhadad as "my brother." He invited him into his own chariot and received a few commercial privileges in Damascus. With some empty promises concerning certain captured cities, the king let him return to his people. A son of the prophets pointed out to Ahab his breach of faith with the Lord and with his people. There was a bleak penalty for his callous act based on a well-known law of responsibility,

therefore thy life shall go for his life, and thy people for his people. (I Kings 20:42)

Ahab's doom was sealed.

NABOTH'S VINEYARD

For Elijah there no longer seemed to be any opposition from the tyrant Jezebel, even though he clashed once more with Ahab. It happened this way:

Ahab was planning to expand his herb garden beside his palace in Samaria. He decided to buy his neighbor Naboth's vineyard. However Naboth, as a democratic Israelite, refused to relinquish the inheritance of his fathers. Ahab went to his room, threw himself down on his bed and sulked. To his amazed Phoenician wife, Jezebel, such admission of the rights of the common man was incomprehensible. She quickly arranged to have Naboth framed by false witnesses. He was stoned to death in the name of the law.

Then she brought the glad tidings to Ahab and told him to take possession of the vineyard.

While Ahab was inspecting his new property, Elijah suddenly stood before him.

And Ahab said to Elijah, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?
And he answered, I have found thee: because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord. Behold, I will bring evil upon thee, and will take away thy posterity,... (I Kings 21:20,21)

Three years later at Ramoth-Gilead Ahab died at the hands of Syrian soldiers whose king he had hailed as “my brother.” His son Ahaziah reigned in Israel.

THE FIRE OF DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY

The God of Israel was practically unknown to Ahaziah. To him Elijah gave one last sign of the overall sovereignty of the One God.

Early in his reign Ahaziah was seriously injured in a fall from a window in his palace. He sent messengers to Baal-zebub, god of the Philistine city of Ekron, to inquire if he should recover. Elijah intercepted the messengers. He ordered them to return and tell the king that since he acknowledged no god in Israel he would surely die.

Hoping to force the prophet to reverse that verdict, Ahaziah sent a band of fifty men to command his presence in Samaria. The fifty men and their captain, having delivered the curt order, were consumed by fire. Another captain was sent with his fifty demanding, "Come down quickly!" He and his band were also struck by fire. Once more a force of fifty was sent to Elijah. This time the captain approached with reverence. He acknowledging the power and begged the mercy of the man of God. Elijah went to Samaria to repeat to the king the verdict of death. Ahaziah died. His brother Joram became the king of Israel. It was the last of the dynasty of Omri.

THE CHARIOT OF ISRAEL

The time came when Elijah had finished his earthly tasks. He asked his servant Elisha to remain in Gilgal while he went on alone to Bethel. However Elisha, thirsting for his masters' powerful knowledge, replied

As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee.
(2 Kings 2:2)

Again at Bethel and at Jericho Elijah made the request and again Elisha refused. Across the Jordan they went, into the territory where Moses had finished his mission.

And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me. And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so. (2 Kings 2:9,10)

Not even Elijah could give spiritual insight for which his friend and servant was not prepared!

We have no way of knowing how another witness might have reported the awe-inspiring scene that followed but to Elisha's exalted thought,

...behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof,... (2 Kings 2:11,12)

At that moment he saw the potential power of Elijah's knowledge. What greater protection could Israel have than the certainty of God's complete dominion?

Elisha recrossed the Jordan wearing the cloak that had fallen from his master's shoulders. In Jericho he reported his exalted experience. The sons of the prophets insisted on sending fifty men to search for their revered leader. Three days later the group returned, having found no trace of him. Elisha scolded them, "Did I not say unto you, Go not?"

ELISHA

Elisha delved no further into the identity of God. Instead he consolidated and proved the knowledge already gained. He also played an important part in political and military affairs.

And Mesha king of Moab was a sheep master, and rendered unto the king of Israel an hundred thousand lambs, and an hundred thousand rams, with the wool. But it came to pass, when Ahab was dead, that the king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel. (2 Kings 3:4,S)

Joram of Israel enlisted the help of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah. Instead of crossing Jordan north of the Salt Sea the two kings with their mighty armies marched south around the sea through Edom. There they were joined by the king of Edom and his men.

The desert land could not support so great an army. Men and beasts were soon suffering from lack of water. Joram lost courage. But Jehoshaphat had been brought up in the sturdier faith of Judah. He insisted on seeking the advice of Elisha, prophet of the One God. Although he turned with cutting scorn from the king of Israel, Elisha advised Jehoshaphat to dig a network of ditches in the dry riverbed. This was done. In the morning the sun reflected red from ditches filled with water. The Moabites believed it was the blood of intertribal battle! Refreshed and encouraged, the three armies routed the overconfident Moabites, ruined their fields, cut down their trees and choked their wells with earth.

The defeated king of Moab turned to his god with the most powerful supplications at his command. On the city wall, in full view of all the warriors, Mesha sacrificed his eldest son, the crown prince, to the Moabite god Chemoth.

Before such an awful omen, faith in Elisha's God faltered and crumbled. Victory was forgotten. The superstitious warriors of Israel, the pagan army of Edom, probably even some of Jehoshaphat's forces, disbanded and went home in abject fear.

In the Louvre in Paris stands the "Moabite Stone," a carefully shaped stele of black basalt a bit over a meter high. On it king Mesha triumphantly inscribed his successful bid for independence (though not the death of his son) and his subsequent conquering of certain Israelite towns.

THE POT OF OIL

It is on a one-to-one basis that Elisha is best known to us. He brought comfort, healing and wisdom to human situations. One familiar story is that of the widow of one of the sons of the prophets who appealed to him one day in deepest sorrow. A creditor was about to seize her two sons as bondmen. She had no money to pay her debts. Elisha questioned her,

What shall I do for thee? Tell me, what hast thou in the house?
And she said, Thine handmaid hath not anything in the house,
save a pot of oil. (2 Kings 4:2)

Elisha changed the emphasis from "not anything" to "something." He directed her to borrow pots and jars from her neighbors. Then she must close the door upon herself and her sons and pour out the oil into those many vessels.

From the one small pot of oil all the borrowed containers were filled. When the oil was sold, she found herself able to pay her creditors. As usual the details that might bring this incident within our realm of understanding are omitted. Only the end results, the fact that the Lord provided that which was needed, was of importance to the narrators.

IT IS WELL

Healing and teaching, Elisha often passed through the predominantly Canaanite city of Shunem. There a certain wealthy woman, realizing that this was no ordinary traveler, persuaded her husband to build a little room against the wall of their flat roofed house. They furnished it simply with a bed, a table, a stool and a candlestick, and invited Elisha to rest there whenever he came that way. In return, Elisha promised the Shunammite woman that the source of her great unhappiness, her childlessness, would be healed. In due time a son was born to the grateful woman. But while he was still a child he suffered a sunstroke and died.

With no outcry of mourning, the woman laid the dead child on Elisha's bed, telling her husband only, "It shall be well." Then she asked a young man to saddle a donkey for her and she set out on the twenty-four kilometer journey to Mount Carmel where Elisha lived. When Elisha's servant came out to meet them she dismissed him with the statement, "It is well." Only to Elisha did she confess that her son was dead. Confident of the power of his God, she insisted that he come immediately to the child. Humbling himself before the woman's need the prophet Elisha hurried to Shunem. There he wrestled with the problem of death and life until the God-given child revived.

NAAMAN THE LEPER

Proof of the power of Israel's God soon spread even into Syria, which was for the moment at peace with her Southern neighbor.

Naaman, Benhadad's trusted commander, was a leper. From his wife's Israelite slave girl he learned that a prophet lived in Israel who could heal him. He determined to seek help there. Supposing that Israel's king, like Syria's, was the incarnation of her God he presented himself in Samaria to the startled King Joram. Bearing rich gifts and a letter from the formidable King Benhadad he demanded that Naaman be cured.

Learning of the frightened king's predicament Elisha sent reassuring word to Samaria, "Let him now come to me." Naaman, with his chariots and prancing horses, drew up before Elisha's door. But the prophet did not come out to greet him. Instead he merely sent a message to his illustrious visitor:

Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again
to thee, and thou shalt be clean. (2 Kings 5:10)

Furious at such belittling treatment and the ridiculous instructions Naaman drove away. However his devoted servants begged him to obey the holy man. Out of consideration for them he finally went down and

dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was cleanand he said, Behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel,...(2 Kings 5:14,15)

Thus Elisha proved to Naaman that it was not the prophet, but God and his own humility that had healed him. In the pagan conviction that gods cannot be genuinely worshipped save on their own soil, Naaman took back to Syria two mule loads of Israel's earth. On it he built an altar to the only true God.

SYRIA DISCOMFITED

Before long, Syria's troops again came plundering in Israel. However Elisha's wisdom, faith in God and love for his people enabled him to foresee Syria's plans. The Israelites parried their thrusts time after time. When at last Benhadad realized the prophet's powers, he focused his full force on capturing Elisha. Gehazi, Elisha's servant, awoke one morning in Dothan to find the city ringed about with Syrian chariots and horsemen. In consternation he cried out to Elisha,

Alas, my master! How shall we do? And he answered, Fear not; for they that be with us are more than they that be with them.
(2 Kings 6:15,16)

For a moment Gehazi's consciousness was raised to his master's level .

...and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. (2 Kings 6:17)

Elisha walked boldly out to meet the enemy, praying that they might be smitten with blindness. Unrecognized, he told them, "Follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom ye seek," and blindly they followed him over the hills to the heavily fortified city of Samaria. Helpless, they were surrounded and accounted as captives, fed and sent home.

SIEGE OF SAMARIA

There were times when, like Elijah, Elisha had to stand in terrible loneliness when circumstances seemed to prove his faith was folly. Such was the case when Benhadad laid siege to Samaria itself. As the grim weeks passed, hunger gripped the city. Even such revolting nourishment as dove's dung became so scarce it was fought over and sold for five pieces of silver for a quarter of a liter. Since Elisha counseled against surrender the malevolent finger of blame was pointed at him. Then the grieving King Joram was told of cannibalism. In horror he swore that Elisha should not live another day. He confronted Elisha but the prophet told him with unshakable faith,

Hear ye the word of the Lord; Thus saith the Lord, Tomorrow about this time shall a measure of fine flour be sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel, in the gate of Samaria. (2 Kings 7:1)

Dubiously the elders hesitated one more day. That night four starving lepers, reasoning that death lay in every direction, stole down to the Syrian camp seeking food. They found the camp abandoned! The Lord had made the soldiers to hear a great noise of chariots and horses. Convinced that the hosts of the Hittites and of Egypt had come to Samaria's rescue they fled in terror. They dropped their burdens as they ran. The road to Jordan was strewn with their belongings. There was food aplenty in the Syrian camp. The next morning fine flour was sold for a shekel in Samaria's gate, as the Lord had said.

Once more Elisha was hailed in Samaria as the prophet of the true God.

BENHADAD'S DEATH

About the year 845 B.C.E., Elijah's vision concerning the affairs of Syria came to a head. Benhadad was ill. He sent his servant Hazael, laden with presents, to ask the man of God if he would recover. Elisha replied enigmatically that he could recover but that he would surely die. Then, to Hazael's astonishment, Elisha broke into uncontrolled weeping and said,

...I know the evil that thou wilt do unto the children of Israel: their strong holds wilt thou set on fire, and their young men wilt thou slay with the sword,The Lord hath shewed me that thou shalt be king over Syria. (2 Kings 8:12,13)

The following day Hazael murdered his ailing monarch and seized the throne of Syria. Although he would, in his very able reign, persecute Israel without mercy the cliquish snobbery of royalty was ended.

JEHU

Unrest in Israel was nearing the boiling point. Unprotected villagers lived in constant fear of Syrian raids, of having their crops stolen, their children taken as slaves. The poor in the cities saw their rich neighbors growing arrogant among their luxuries. The judges were swayed by bribes, not by justice. In spite of Elijah's proof of the power of the One God, Baal worship continued in the palace. Moreover the army was seething with discontent at years of indecisive battling with the Syrians for Ramath in Gilead.

King Joram, son of Ahab, returned to Jezreel to recover from wounds received in battle. The stage was set, Elisha was convinced, for the end of Ahab's line which Elijah

had foretold. He sent a young prophet hurrying to Jehu, captain of the army, to anoint him king in the name of the Lord. His military companions boisterously proclaimed Jehu king of Israel.

Soon the watchman in Jezreel reported to the wounded King Joram and his visiting cousin, King Ahaziah of Judah, the approach of a chariot,

and the driving is like the driving of Jehu the son of Nimshi; for he driveth furiously. (2 Kings 9:20)

It was too late for flight or self-defense. Jehu killed both Joram and Ahaziah, who were also involved in Baal worship. Then he fell into a fanatic frenzy of slaughter that did not cease until Jezebel, all Ahab's house, all the prophets of Baal and many totally innocent people were exterminated. "Thus Jehu destroyed Baal out of Israel."

Jehu's hatred of Baal was not balanced with zeal for the God of Israel. He permitted the calf shrines at Dan and at Bethel, which Jeroboam had set up, to remain. Nor were his military achievements noteworthy. He alienated both Judah and Israel's traditional ally, Phoenicia. Before the end of Jehu's twenty-eight year reign, Hazael of Damascus had cut the kingdom of Israel to a fraction of what it had been.

Elisha took no further guiding part in national affairs, though both Israel and Judah held him in deep affection and esteem. The depth of his influence and their sense of loss were reflected in the cry of mourning of Jehu's grandson at Elisha's deathbed:

O my father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. (2 Kings 13:14)

THE "E" DOCUMENTS

Hopes for a new golden age shone brightly in the reign of Jehu's great-grandson, Jeroboam II. He came to the throne of Israel about 786 B.C.E.. He wrenched the captive Northern cities from the weakening grasp of Syria. They had been sorely pressed by the rising strength of Assyria farther north and east. He enlarged Israel's borders until, except for Judah, they equaled David's kingdom and foreign commerce flourished.

Prosperity under David and Solomon had occasioned the gathering of tribal background tradition resulting in the "J" writings. Now in the new national consciousness of the ten Northern tribes a new collection of the great sagas of the children of Israel came into being. Its theme was a plea for unity among the Israelites and a return to the teachings of Moses. The word used for God was Elohim, the highest concept of majesty. Therefore the writings are termed by modern students the "E" documents.

The use of the two different terms, Yahweh in Judah and Elohim in Israel, gives a glimpse into the complexity of the social structure of the children of Israel. It reveals that

the twelve tribes were not actually solid family blocks. They were now twelve groups, of somewhat varying experiences, joined by common consent and preponderantly by common ancestry in the worship of the One God.

Such an arrangement was not unusual at that time. The customary number twelve was useful in the monthly rotation of duties. The rather stylized "twelve sons of Jacob" gave simplicity and unity. Actually Ephraim and Manasseh were half Egyptians. A mixed crowd left Egypt with Moses. Moses himself had a Midianite and an Ethiopian wife whose relatives joined him. Some tribes merged with others. All these varied elements were combined in the great family of Israel.

Separated branches of a family may treasure tales of the exploits of a common ancestor in slightly differing form. So the histories in "J" and "E" differed somewhat in detail but not in substance. Events were remembered for their significance. Among the priests working steadily in North and South there was no real schism.

Modern Bible readers may be occasionally puzzled by repetitions and side by side differences. They should remember that about 700 B.C.E., when there was no longer a kingdom of Israel, the two documents "J" and "E" were joined together and reverently interwoven.

AMOS

The affluent reign of Jeroboam II was the setting for another tremendous development of the Israelite religion, the appearance of the "literary prophets." These were teachers of deepening understanding. Their polished discourses, sometimes couched in poetry, would bring comfort and direction to their people and to the Western world for centuries to come.

The first of these writing prophets was Amos. His was the pastoral life of a "pincher" of sycamore fruit. Like the wild figs that grow in the rocky soil near Jerusalem they ripen more readily if slightly bruised. But he was also a shepherd. As a merchant for his wool he must have frequented the busiest market cities. In both Judah and Israel he was greatly troubled by the growing depravity of the ruling classes. They lived in extravagant luxury and wastefulness. There was total indifference to the lying, bribery and murder that removed all hope of justice from the poor. To his quiet wisdom it was clear that such social wrongs must deprive Israel of strength to withstand the gathering threat from the growing empire of Assyria. His distress became so deep that he felt divinely called to speak out boldly. He pleaded for true worship and social justice. He warned that God, the God of all the nations, would use Assyria to bring about the downfall of unfaithful Israel. At Bethel, market center and shrine of the golden calf and of the storm god Baal, he cried,

...prepare to meet thy God, O Israel, For lo, he that formeth the mountains, and createth the wind, and declareth unto man what is his thought,...The Lord, the God of hosts, is his name.
(Amos 4:12,13)

For thus saith the Lord unto the house of Israel, Seek ye me and ye shall live; But seek not Bethel, nor enter into Gilgal,... for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Bethel shall come to naught.
(Amos 5:4,5)

Hypocrisy, the empty self-indulgence of the wealthy who felt safe behind a wall of religious ritual and thoughtless tithing, was the special target of his message from the Lord:

I hate, I despise your feast days,... Though ye offer me burnt offers and your meat offerings, I will not accept them:... Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs;... But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

Woe to them that are at ease in Zion, and trust in the mountain of Samaria That lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock,... Therefore now they shall go captive with the first that go captive, and the banquet of them that stretched themselves shall be removed. (Amos 6:1,4,7)

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord; And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it. (Amos 8:11,12)

What was Amos' influence in Israel? The records in the books of Kings and Chronicles say not a word about him. He states that because he predicted the fall of prosperous Israel and death by the sword for Jeroboam II he was accused of treason and ordered out of Bethel. His discourses were collected, probably by his students, and their timeless wisdom was reverently studied in both Israel and Judah.

Delicately carved fragments of those ivory couches, often depicting pagan scenes, have found their way to modern museums. They are mute witness to the careless self-indulgence which he fought.

HOSEA

A second prophet, Hosea, was contemporary with Amos and shared with him the effort to awaken Israel. A native of the Northern kingdom he was brought up in the "E" tradition. He looked back to Moses for his people's guidance, and yearned for reconciliation between Ephraim, as he called Israel and Judah. He was gentler than Amos. His message came from his own broken heart. Whether his story is allegory or actual experience is still debated among Bible students.

Hosea married a woman named Gomer, whom he loved deeply. Even her unfaithfulness did not shake his love for her. When she finally realized the emptiness of her new lovers' gifts, and the real comfort and protection that Hosea offered, she returned to him. He gave her full forgiveness.

Could man be more loving than God? To Hosea, Israel was like the wayward woman. God was her patient, loving husband, waiting for her return.

Hosea's first teachings were quite personal. He named his firstborn son Jezreel. This would remind Israel that the murderous excesses of Jehu at Jezreel had yet to be amended. His second child, a daughter, he named Lo-Ruhama, "no mercy." How could Israel expect mercy while still unfaithful to her God? Another son he sadly called Lo-Ammi, "nor my people."

Yet Hosea proclaimed that this sadness should not be forever. Righteousness would surely be answered with forgiveness by a loving God.

...I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God. (Hosea 2:23; I Peter 2:10; Romans 9:25)

Like Amos, Hosea was distressed by the emptiness of the religious observances. In a message from the Lord he cries,

O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? For your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away. (Hosea 6:4)

For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6; Mathew 9:13)

O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to the Lord: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously. (Hosea 14:1, 2)

Hosea's glimpse of the unalterable love of God, and his picture of Israel as an unfaithful wife, would strongly influence the later prophets. It would provide quotations for both the Old and New Testament teachers. But at that crucial time Israel and Judah paid scant attention to his call.

ISRAEL IS REMOVED

The kingdom of Israel did not return to the Lord. Six months after the death of Jeroboam II his son was assassinated. This ended the house of Jehu. His murderer was slain by Menahem. He held the throne for ten years but was forced to pay heavy tribute in silver and gold to the Assyrian king, called Pul in the Bible. Discontent with the necessarily high taxes paved the way for the murder of Menahem's son, king Pekahiah, by Pekah. He immediately set about uniting all the small states of the area against the ravages of Assyria.

Ahaz, king of Judah, refused to join this futile alliance. Insecure without unanimity, Pekah and the Syrian king Rezin of Damascus sent armies storming toward Jerusalem. He persuaded the king of Edom to engage Ahaz' attention by seizing the valuable mining country south of the Salt Sea. This shortsighted move drove the frightened king of Judah to appeal for help to Tiglath-pileser. He sent him a great store of treasures, and the Assyrian king was quick to take advantage of the turmoil. He decimated Syria, killed Rezin and deported the citizens of Damascus. Pekah hurried home from the battlefield to save what he could of Israel, but was slain by his enraged subjects. With the connivance of Assyria, Hoshea (not to be confused with the prophet Hosea) the last king of Israel, was enthroned in Samaria.

There was no thought now of calling on the Lord for wisdom. Small, frightened men depended ineffectually on hasty diplomacy and intrigue. Hoshea paid annual tribute to Tiglathpileser until the death of the latter. Then he fastened his hopes on some obscure Egyptian commander and waited for help from that source. It never came. Instead Assyria, in her annual campaign down the Fertile Crescent, rolled relentlessly through what remained of Israel and besieged Samaria. For two years the royal city-fort survived, so skillfully had Omri designed and built it with its water cisterns within its strong walls. But finally it crumbled at the feet of the Assyrian Sargon II in the year 721 B.C.E.

In the past the object of Assyria's conquests had merely been riches, by plunder and tribute. However ravaged victims were a constant menace to their overlords. Rebellion was sure to break out at the least sign of weakness. The new policy of the Assyrian rulers was to prevent rebellion by scattering the conquered people. Therefore the leading families of Israel, those very people who had "stretched themselves" on their luxurious couches, were dragged off to distant cities of Assyria and Media. Only the powerless poor were left to tend the fields. Other people from other conquered areas, with strange foreign customs and unknown gods, were brought into Samaria. The ten tribes lost their identity forever.

And they left all the commandments of the Lord their God, and made them molten images, even two calves, and made a grove, and worshipped all the hosts of heaven, and served Baal, Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight: there was none left but the tribe of Judah only.
(2 Kings 17:16, 18)