
a *Grace Notes* course

Old Testament History

by Alfred Edersheim

History 514

Grace Notes

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V_10 - REHOBAM FIRST KING OF JUDAH
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1 Kings 12; 14:21-23; 2 Chronicles 10 to 12

Strange as it may seem, despite the multifarious marriages of the king, his alliances with neighboring nations, and his immense wealth, "the house of Solomon" was far from strong at the time of his decease. It may have been that Solomon left other sons besides Rehoboam, though it is strange that we find no notice of them, nor, indeed, of any child, except a casual remark about two of Solomon's daughters (1 Kings 4:11, 15). If other children survived him, their position must have been far less influential than that of the sons of David, nor does Rehoboam's succession appear to have been ever contested by any member of the family.

Rehoboam, or rather Rechavam ("he who enlargeth the people"), must have been very young at his accession. This we gather from the expression by which they "who had grown up with him" are described, and from the manner in which his son and successor, Abijah, characterized the commencement of his reign (2 Chronicles 13:7). There seems, therefore, considerable probability attaching to the suggestion, that the notice of his age at his accession - forty-one (1 Kings 14:21; 2 Chronicles 12:13) - is the mistake of a copyist, who in transcribing the figures misread the two letters *ak* - twenty-one - for *am* - forty-one. This supposition is strengthened by the fact that Rehoboam was not the son of the Egyptian princess, who seems to have been Solomon's first wife, but of Naamah, an Ammonitess;¹ and we know that it was only after his religious decline (1

Kings 11:1) that Solomon entered upon alliances with "strange women," among whom Ammonitesses are specially mentioned.²

Of the character of Rehoboam we know sufficient to form an accurate estimate. David had taken care to commit the upbringing of his son and successor to the prophet Nathan; and, so far as we can judge, the early surroundings of Solomon were such as not only to keep him from intimacy with light or evil associates, but to train him in earnest piety. But when Rehoboam was born, King Solomon had already entered upon the fatal path which led to the ruin of his race; and the prince was brought up, like any other Eastern in similar circumstances, with the young nobles of a court which had learned foreign modes of thinking and foreign manners. The relation between the aristocracy and the people, between the king and his subjects, had changed from the primitive and God-sanctioned to that of ordinary Eastern despotism; and the notions which Rehoboam and his young friends entertained, appeared only too clearly in the first act of the king's reign. In general, we gather that Rehoboam was vain, weak, and impulsive; ready to give up under the influence of fear what he had desired and attempted when he deemed himself secure. Firm religious principles he had not, and his inclinations led him not only towards idolatry, but to a form of it peculiarly dissolute in its character (1 Kings 14:23, 24; 2 Chronicles 11:17; 12:1). During the first three years of his reign he remained, indeed, faithful to the religion of his fathers, either through the influence of the Levites who had gathered around him from all Israel - though even in this case his motives might be rather political than conscientious - or else under the impression of the outward consequences of his first great mistake. But this mood soon passed away, and when the state-reasons for his early adherence to the worship of Jehovah had ceased to be cogent, or he felt himself secure on his throne,

¹ The LXX notice that she was the granddaughter of Nahash, king of Ammon.

² It is hardly credible that Solomon should have contracted such an alliance before his accession to the throne, which, of course, would be implied if Rehoboam was forty-one years old at the time of his father's death. The Rabbis find a parallel to the marriage of Solomon with Naamah in that of Ruth with Boaz (Jalkut, vol. ii., p. 32 a).

he yielded, as we have seen, to his real inclinations in the matter.

Here, at the outset of the separate history of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, it may be well to take a general view of the relation of these two divisions of the Jewish people to Jehovah, their King. That the sin of Israel was much deeper, and their apostasy from God much sooner and more fully developed than in the case of Judah, appears from the circumstance, that the Divine judgment in the banishment of the people from their land overtook Israel 123 years earlier than Judah. Yet at first sight it seems almost strange that such should have been the case.

Altogether, the period of the separate existence of the two kingdoms (to the deportation of the ten tribes under Shalmaneser, about 722 B.C.) extended over 253 years. During that time, thirteen monarchs reigned over Judah, and twenty over Israel - besides two periods of probable interregnum, or rather of anarchy in Israel. The religious history of the ten tribes during these two and a half centuries may be written in very brief compass. Of all the kings of Israel it is uniformly said, that they "walked in the ways of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat," except of Ahab and his two sons (Ahaziah and Joram), under whose reigns the worship of Baal became the established religion of the country. It follows, that there was not a single king in Israel who really served the LORD or worshipped in His Temple. On the other hand, there were at least five kings in Judah distinguished for their piety (Asa, Jehoshaphat, Uzziah, Jotham, and Hezekiah), while of the other eight, two (Joash and Amaziah) continued for a considerable, and a third (Rehoboam) for a short period their profession of the religion of their fathers. Four of the other five kings acquired, indeed, a terrible notoriety for daring blasphemy. Abijam, the son and successor of Rehoboam, adopted all the practices of his father during the last fourteen years of that monarch's reign. During the reign of Joram the worship of Baal was introduced into Judah; and we know with what terrible consistency it was continued under Ahaziah and Athaliah, the measure of iniquity being filled by Ahaz, who ascended the throne twenty years before the deportation of the ten

tribes, when the doors of the Sanctuary were actually closed, and an idol-altar set up in the Temple court. But, despite all this, idolatry never struck its roots deeply among the people, and this for three reasons. There was, first, the continued influence for good of the Temple at Jerusalem; and in this we see at least one providential reason for the existence of a central Sanctuary, and for the stringency of the Law which confined all worship to its courts. Secondly, the idolatrous kings of Judah were always succeeded by monarchs distinguished for piety, who swept away the rites of their predecessors; while, lastly and most remarkably, the reign of the idolatrous kings was uniformly brief as compared with that of the God-fearing rulers. Thus, on a review of the whole period, we find that, of the 253 years between the accession of Rehoboam and the deportation of the ten tribes, 200 passed under the rule of monarchs who maintained the religion of Jehovah, while only during 53 years His worship was more or less discarded by the kings of Judah.³

We repeat, it were a mistake to ascribe the separation of the ten tribes entirely to the harsh and foolish refusal of Rehoboam to redress the grievances of the people. This only set the spark to the inflammable material which had long been accumulating. We have seen how dissatisfaction had spread, especially in the northern parts of the kingdom, during the later part of Solomon's reign; how, indeed, a rising seems to have been actually attempted by Jeroboam, though for the time it failed. We have also called attention to the deep-seated tribal jealousy between Ephraim and Judah, which ever and again broke into open hostility (Judges 8:1-3; 12:1-6; 2 Samuel 2:9; 19:42, 43). This, indeed, may be described as the ultimate (secondary) cause of the separation of the two kingdoms. And, if proof were required that the rebellion against Rehoboam was only the outcome of previously existing tendencies, we would find it even in the circumstance that the language used by

³ We arrive at this result by the following computation: - Years of public idolatry under Rehoboam, 14; under Abijah, 3; under Joram, 6; under Ahaziah, 1; under Athaliah, 6; under Ahaz, 16; or in all 46 years, to which we add 7, for the later idolatrous reigns of Joash and Amaziah. See Keil, *Bibl. Commentar*, vol. iii., pp. 137, 138.

the representatives of Israel, when renouncing the rule of Rehoboam, was exactly the same as that of Sheba when he raised against David the standard of what would be represented as the ancient federal Republic of Israel (2 Samuel 20:1 comp. with 1 Kings 12:16). Still more wrongful would it be to account for the conduct either of Israel or of Jeroboam, or even to attempt vindicating it, on the ground of the prophecy of Ahijah (1 Kings 11:29-39). The latter foretold an event in history, and explained the reason of what, in view of the promises to David, would otherwise have been unaccountable. But such prediction and announcement of judgment - even if known to the tribes - warranted neither their rebellion nor the usurpation of Jeroboam. It is, indeed, true that, as the Old Testament considers all events as directly connected with God, its fundamental principle being: Jehovah reigneth - and that not merely in a pseudo-spiritual, but in the fullest sense - this, as all other things that come to man, is ultimately traced up to the living God. So was the resistance of Pharaoh, and so are the sword, the pestilence, and the famine. For, all things are of Him, Who sendeth blessings upon His people, and taketh vengeance of their inventions; Who equally ruleth in the armies of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; Who maketh the wrath of man as well as the worship of His people to praise Him; Who always doeth marvelously, whether He accomplish His purposes by direct interposition from heaven, or, as much more frequently, through a chain of natural causation, of which He holds the first, and man the last, link. This grand truth, as fully expressed and applied in the sublime language of Psalm 147, is the sheet-anchor of faith by which it rides out the storms of this world. Ever to look up straight to God, to turn from events and secondary causations to Jehovah as the living God and the reigning King, is that denial of things seen and affirmation of things unseen, which constitute the victory of faith over the world.

On the death of his father, Rehoboam seems to have at once, and without opposition, assumed the reins of government. His enthronement at Jerusalem implied the homage of Judah and its neighbor-tribe Benjamin. According to ancient custom, the representatives of the more distant tribes should have assembled at the residence of

the king, when in a great popular assembly the royal dignity would be solemnly conferred, and public homage rendered to the new monarch (comp. 1 Samuel 11:15; 2 Samuel 2:4; 5:3; 1 Chronicles 29:22). But, instead of repairing to Jerusalem, the representatives of the ten tribes gathered at Shechem, the ancient capital of Ephraim, where important popular assemblies had previously been held (Joshua 8:30-35; 24:1-28), and the first claimant of royalty in Israel, Abimelech, had set up his throne (Judges 9:1-23). Only one meaning could attach to their choice of this place.⁴

They had indeed come to make Rehoboam king, but only with full concessions to their tribal claims. All that they now required was an energetic leader. Such an one was to hand in the person of Jeroboam, who in the reign of King Solomon had headed the popular movement. After the failure of his attempt, he had fled into Egypt, and been welcomed by Shishak. The weak (21st Tanite) dynasty, with which King Solomon had formed a matrimonial alliance, had been replaced by the vigorous and martial rule of Shishak (probably about fifteen years before the death of Solomon). The rising kingdom of Palestine - allied as it was with the preceding dynasty - was too close, and probably too threatening a neighbor not to be attentively watched by Shishak. It was obviously his policy to encourage Jeroboam, and to support any movement which might divide the southern from the northern tribes, and thus give Egypt the supremacy over both. In point of fact, five years later Shishak led an expedition against Rehoboam, probably not so much for the purpose of humbling Judah as of strengthening the new kingdom of Israel.

The sacred text leaves it doubtful whether, after hearing of the accession of Rehoboam, Jeroboam continued in Egypt until sent for by the representatives of the ten tribes, or returned to Ephraim of his own accord.⁵ In any case, he was

⁴ Jewish commentators expressly account for the gathering of the ten tribes at Shechem on the ground of their intention to make Jeroboam their king.

⁵ The LXX version has here several additions about the mother of Jeroboam, his stay in Egypt, his conduct after his

not in Shechem when the assembly of the Israelitish deputies met there, but was expressly sent for to conduct negotiations on their behalf.⁶

It was a mark of weakness on the part of Rehoboam to have gone to Shechem at all; and it must have encouraged the deputies in their demands. Moderate as these sound, they seem to imply not only a lightening of the "heavy" burden of forced labor and taxation, but of the "grievous yoke" of what they regarded as a despotism, which prevented their free movements. It is on this supposition alone that we can fully account for the reply which Rehoboam ultimately gave them. The king took three days to consider the demand. First, he consulted Solomon's old advisers, who strongly urged a policy of at least temporary compliance. The advice was evidently ungrateful, and the king - as Absalom of old, and most weak men in analogous circumstances - next turned to another set of counselors. They were his young companions - as the text throughout contemptuously designates them: "the children (the boys) who had grown up with him." With their notions of the royal supremacy, they seem to have imagined that such dating attempts at independence arose from doubt of the king's power and courage, and would be best repressed if sternly met by an overawing assertion of authority. Rehoboam was not to discuss their demands, but to tell them that they would find they had to deal with a monarch far more powerful and far more strict than his father had been. To put it in the vain-glorious language of the Eastern "boy-counselors," he was to say to them, "My little finger is bigger than my father's hips. And now my father did lade upon you a heavy yoke, and I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips [those of ordinary slaves], but I will chastise you with [so-called] 'scorpions'" - or whips armed with hooks, such as were probably used upon criminals or recalcitrants.

return, etc. This is not the place to discuss them in detail, but they may safely be rejected as legendary, and, indeed, quite in the spirit of later Jewish tradition.

⁶ Probably Jeroboam returned of his own account, but did not go to Shechem until he was sent for by the deputies of Israel. This accords with the two versions. There is no need further to discuss here the reading, or rather the proper punctuation of 1 Kings 12:2, 3.

Grossly foolish as this advice was, Rehoboam followed it - the sacred writer remarking, in order to account for such an occurrence: "for the turn (of events) was from Jehovah, that He might perform His word which Jehovah spake by the hand of Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat."

The effect was, indeed, immediate. To the shout of Sheba's ancient war-cry of rebellion the assembly renounced their allegiance to the house of David, and the deputies returned to their homes. Rehoboam perceived his fatal error, when it was too late to retrieve its consequences. Even his attempt in that direction was a mistake. The king sent Adoram,⁷ the superintendent of the tribute and of forced labor⁸ - the two forming apparently one department of the king's dues - to arrange, if possible, matters with the rebellious tribes. But this seemed only like trifling with their grievances, and a fresh insult. The presence of the hated official called forth such feelings, that he was stoned, and Rehoboam himself narrowly escaped the same fate by flight to Jerusalem.

The rebellion of the ten tribes was soon followed by their formation into an independent kingdom. When, on their return from Shechem, the deputies made known the presence of Jeroboam, the tribes sent for him, and in a popular assembly appointed him king over all Israel. Still, it must not be thought that the whole land was absolutely subject to him. When thinking of monarchy in Palestine, it is always necessary to bear in mind the long-established and great municipal fights and liberties which made every city with its district, under its Elders, almost an independent state within the state. Accordingly, we find it chronicled as a note worthy fact (1 Kings 12:17), that King Rehoboam reigned over those Israelites who were settled in Judean towns - either wholly inhabiting, or forming the majority in them; while it is marked as a wise measure on the part of Rehoboam, that he distributed "his children throughout all the

⁷ As three persons of that name are mentioned (2 Samuel 20:24; 1 Kings 5:6; 12:18) who must have lived at different times, may not "Adoram" be the appellation of the office?

⁸ The one Hebrew word means both - and probably the two belonged to the same department of royal dues.

countries (districts) of Judah and Benjamin unto every fenced city" no doubt, with the view of making sure of their allegiance. It seems to have been otherwise within the domains of Jeroboam. From 2 Chronicles 11:13-16 we learn that, on the substitution by Jeroboam and his successors of the worship of the golden calves for the service of Jehovah, the old religion was disestablished, and the Levites deprived of their ecclesiastical revenues, the new priesthood which took their place being probably supported by the dues of their office, and, if we may judge from the history of Ahab (1 Kings 18:19), by direct assistance from the royal treasury. In consequence of these changes, many of the Levites seem to have settled in Judaea, followed perhaps by more or less extensive migrations of the pious laity, varying according to the difficulties put in the way of resorting to the great festivals in Jerusalem. It would, however, be a mistake to infer the entire exodus of the pious laity or of the Levites.⁹ But even if such had been the case, the feeling in the ancient Levitical cities would for some time have continued sufficiently strong to refuse allegiance to Jeroboam.

And here a remarkable document throws unexpected light upon our history. On the wall of the great Egyptian Temple of Karnak, Shishak has left a record of his victorious expedition against Judah. Among the conquests there named 133 have been deciphered - although only partially identified - while 14 are now illegible. The names ascertained have been arranged into three groups - those of Judean cities (the smallness of their number being accounted for by the erasures just mentioned); those of Arab tribes, south of Palestine; and those of Levitical and Canaanite cities within the territory of the new kingdom of Israel. It is the latter which here alone claim our attention.

Any conquest of cities within the territory of Jeroboam might surprise us, since the expedition of Shishak was against Judah, and not against Israel - indeed, rather in alliance with Jeroboam

⁹ In point of fact, 2 Chronicles 11:16 does not necessarily imply any settlement of the pious laity in Judah; and even the evidence for that of the priests and Levites is not quite convincing (see the next chapter).

and in support of his new kingdom. Another remarkable circumstance is, that these Israelitish conquests of Shishak are all of Levitical or else of ancient Canaanite cities, and that they are of towns in all parts of the territory of the ten tribes, and at considerable distances from one another, there being, however, no mention of the taking of the intervening cities. All these facts point to the conclusion, to which we have already been directed on quite independent grounds, that the Levitical and ancient Canaanite cities within the territory of Jeroboam did not acknowledge his rule. This is why they were attacked and conquered by Shishak on his expedition against Judah, as virtually subject to the house of David, and hence constituting an element not only of rebellion but of danger within the new kingdom of Israel. Before quitting this subject, these two remarks may be allowed, how wonderfully, and we may add, unexpectedly, documents of secular history - apparently accidentally discovered - confirm and illustrate the narratives of the Bible; and how wise, politically and religiously, how suited to the national life, were the institutions of the Old Testament, even when to our notions they seem most strange, as in the case of Levitical cities throughout the land. For, these cities, besides serving other most important purposes, formed also the strongest bond of political union, and at the same time the most powerful means of preserving throughout the country the unity of the faith in the unity of the central worship of Jehovah at Jerusalem. Thus national union and religious purity were bound up together, and helped to preserve each other.

But to return. On the elevation of Jeroboam to the new throne of Israel, Rehoboam made one more attempt to recover the lost parts of David's kingdom. He assembled an army of 180,000 men¹⁰ from Judah and Benjamin - the latter tribe having apparently become almost unified with Judah since the establishment of the political and religious capital in Jerusalem, through which ran the boundary-line between Judah and Benjamin.

¹⁰ The LXX has 120,000, but the number in the Hebrew text is moderate (comp. 2 Samuel 24:9).

But the expedition was at its outset arrested by Divine direction through the prophet Shemaiah.¹¹

This abandonment of an expedition and dispersion of a host simply upon the word of a prophet, are quite as remarkable as the courage of that prophet in facing an army in such circumstances, and his boldness in so fully declaring as a message from Jehovah what must have been a most unwelcome announcement alike to king and people. Both these considerations are very important in forming an estimate, not only of the religious and political state of the time, and their mutual inter-relations, but of the character of, "Prophetism" in Israel. The expedition once abandoned was not again renewed, although throughout the reign of Rehoboam there were constant incursions and border-raids - probably chiefly of a predatory character - on the part of Judah and of Israel (1 Kings 14:30). The remaining notices of Rehoboam's reign concern the internal and external relations of Judah, as well as the sad religious change which passed over the country after the first three years of his rule. They are recorded, either solely or with much fuller details, in the Book of Chronicles (2 Chronicles 11:4 to 12:16). The first measure referred to is the building of fifteen fortresses, of which thirteen were in the land of Judah - Hebron forming, as it were, the center of theme and only two (Zorah and Aijalon) within the later possession of Benjamin.¹²

They served as a continuous chain of forts south of Jerusalem, and to defend the western approaches into the country. The northern boundary was left wholly unprotected. From this it would appear that Rehoboam chiefly dreaded an incursion from Egypt, though it does not by any means follow that these fortresses were only built after the campaign of Shishak, which took place five years after the accession of Solomon's son.

The next notice concerns the family relations of Rehoboam. It appears that he had eighteen wives and sixty concubines (thirty, according to

Josephus, Ant. 8. 10, 11), following in this respect the evil example of Solomon. Of his wives only two¹³ are named, his cousin Mahalath, the daughter of Jerimoth, a son of David (either the same as Ithream, 1 Chronicles 3:3, or the son of one of David's concubines, 1 Chronicles 3:9), and of Abihail, the daughter of Eliab, David's eldest brother; and Maachah, the daughter, or rather, evidently, the granddaughter of Absalom,¹⁴ through his only child, Tamar (2 Samuel 14:27; 18:18; comp. Jos. Ant. 8. 10, 11), who had married Uriel of Gibeah (2 Chronicles 13:2).

Maachah, named after her paternal great-grandmother (the mother of Absalom, 1 Chronicles 3:2), was the favorite of the king, and her eldest son, Abijah, made "chief among his brethren," with succession to the throne. As already noticed, Rehoboam took care to locate his other sons in the different districts of his territory, giving them ample means for sustaining their rank, and forming numerous and influential alliances for them.¹⁵ Altogether Rehoboam had twenty-eight sons and sixty daughters.

From these general notices, which must be regarded as referring not to any single period, but to the whole reign of Rehoboam, we pass to what, as regards the Scripture narrative, is the most important event in this history. The fact itself is told in fullest detail in the Book of Kings (1 Kings 14:22- 24); its punishment at the hand of God in the Book of Chronicles (2 Chronicles 12:2, 12).

¹³ Some commentators have regarded Abihail (2 Chronicles 11:18) as the name of a third wife, and accordingly represented her, not as a daughter but as a granddaughter of Eliab. But even if this were not contrary to the plain meaning of vers. 18, 19, a granddaughter of Eliab would have been too old for the wife of Rehoboam.

¹⁴ This appears clearly from 2 Chronicles 13:2. At the death of Solomon the daughter of Absalom would be about fifty years of age. In 2 Chronicles 13:2 the name is misspelled Michaiiah.

¹⁵ Our Authorized Version renders 2 Chronicles 11:23: "he desired many wives," which seems to imply that Rehoboam sought them for himself. But this is not the case. The original has it, that he "demanded (or sought)" these alliances for his sons, evidently to strengthen his connection with the noble families of the land.

¹¹ From 2 Chronicles 12:15 we learn that Shemaiah wrote a history of the reign of Rehoboam.

¹² Originally they belonged to Dan (Joshua 19:41, 42), but see 1 Chronicles 6:66-69.

After the first three years of Rehoboam's reign a great change seems to have come over the religious aspect of the country. Rehoboam and Judah did not, indeed, openly renounce the worship of Jehovah. On the contrary, we find that the king continued to attend the house of the LORD in royal state, and that after the incursion of Shishak there was even a partial religious revival ¹⁶ (2 Chronicles 12:11, 12).

Still the general character of this period was, that "Rehoboam forsook the law of Jehovah, and all Israel with him," that "he did evil in that he did not set his heart on seeking Jehovah" (2 Chronicles 12:1, 14, lit.), and, lastly, that "Judah did the evil in the sight of Jehovah, and provoked Him to jealousy (viewing the relation between the LORD and Israel as one of marriage, Numbers 5:14) - more than anything which their fathers had done by their sins which they sinned" (1 Kings 14:22). These sins consisted in building Bamoth, or "high places," i.e., altars on every high hill, and setting up in every grove Mazzeboth, or memorial-stones and pillars dedicated to Baal, and Asherim, or trunks of trees dedicated to Astarte (with all the vileness which their service implied). ¹⁷

This idolatry was, indeed, not new in Israel - though it had probably not been practiced to the same extent. But in addition to this we now read of persons "consecrated" to the Syrian goddess, with the nameless abominations connected therewith. This form of heathen pollution was of purely Canaanite origin. As indicating the influence of the Canaanites upon Judah, it may perhaps be regarded as another evidence of the connection subsisting between Rehoboam and the ancient Canaanite cities within the territory of Israel.

The Divine punishment was not long withheld. Once more it came in the course of natural causation, through the political motives which influenced Shishak, and led him to support

¹⁶ It must not be thought that there was a formal renunciation in Judah of the worship of Jehovah; but, side by side with it other services were carried on, which Holy Scripture rightly describes as so inconsistent with it as to amount to idolatry.

¹⁷ The Bamoth would be on the heights, the Baal-and Astarte-worship in the groves.

Jeroboam. In the fifth year of Rehoboam's reign Shishak marched a large army of Egyptians, Lybians, Sukkiim, ("tent-dwellers"? Arabs?), and Ethiopians, with 1,200 chariots ¹⁸ and 60,000 horsemen, into Judaea, and, after taking the fenced cities along his route, advanced upon Jerusalem, where Rehoboam and his army were gathered.

Once more the prophet Shemaiah averted a contest, which could only have ended in disaster. On showing them that the national danger, though apparently arising from political causes, was really due to their sin against Jehovah (2 Chronicles 12:2); and that it was needless to fight, since, as they had been God-forsaking, they were now God-forsaken (ver. 5) the king and his princes humbled themselves. Thereupon the LORD intimated through His prophet, that He would "grant them deliverance for a little while," on condition of their submitting to Shishak. The reason for this, "that they may know My service, and the service of the kingdoms of the countries," as well as the terms by which the promised deliverance was qualified, contained the most solemn warning of the ultimate consequences of apostasy. Yet the Divine forbearance continued other 370 years before the threatened judgment burst upon the nation. But at this time Jerusalem was spared. Voluntary submission having been made, Shishak entered the city, and contented himself with carrying away the treasures of the Temple and of the Palace, including among the latter the famous golden shields used by Solomon's body-guard on state occasions, ¹⁹ for which Rehoboam now substituted shields of brass. ²⁰

¹⁸ This number is thoroughly consistent with such notices as Exodus 14:7; 1 Kings 10:26, and other well-ascertained historical instances.

¹⁹ These were kept in the guard-house, or "house of the runners," who kept watch at the entrance of the king's house - and not, as before - in the house of the forest of Lebanon (1 Kings 10:17).

²⁰ And yet the Rabbis speak of the reign of Rehoboam as one of the five brilliant periods (those of David, Solomon, Rehoboam, Asa, and Abijah, Shem. R. 15). The Rabbinical notices are collated in the Nachalath Shim., p. 61, cols. c and d. There is a curious legend (Pes. 119, a), that Joseph gathered in Egypt all the gold and silver of the world, and that the children of Israel brought it up with them from Egypt. On the capture of Jerusalem, Shishak is said to have taken it, and the possession

V_11 - JEROBOAM, FIRST KING OF ISRAEL
Political measures of Jeroboam — the golden calves — the new priesthood and the new festival — the man of Elohim from Judah — his message and sign — Jeroboam struck by Jehovah and miraculously restored — invitation to the man of Elohim — heathen view of miracles — the old prophet — return of the man of Elohim to Bethel — JUDGMENT on his disobedience — character of the old prophet and of the man of Elohim — sickness of the pious child of Jeroboam — mission of his mother to Ahijah — predicted judgment — death of the child — remaining notices of Jeroboam.

1 Kings 12:25 to 14:20

FROM the history of Judah under Rehoboam, we turn to that of the newly-established kingdom of Israel, the record of which is only found in the Book of Kings (1 Kings 12:25 - 14:20). The first object of Jeroboam ("He shall increase the people") was to strengthen the defenses of his throne. For this purpose he fortified Shechem, the modern Nabiris - which he made his residence until he exchanged it for Tirzah (1 Kings 14:17) - and also the ancient Peniel (Genesis 32:30, 31; Judges 8:8), on the other side Jordan. As the latter place commanded the great caravan-route to Damascus and Palmyra, its fortification would serve the double purpose of establishing the rule of Jeroboam in the territory east of the Jordan, and of protecting the country against incursions from the east and northeast. His next measure, though, as he deemed it, also of a protective character, not only involved the most daring religious innovation ever attempted in Israel, but was fraught with the most fatal consequences to Jeroboam and to Israel. How deeply Israel had sunk appears alike from the fact that the king acted with the approbation of his advisers ²¹ - no doubt the representatives of the ten tribes - and that the people, with the exception of the Levites and a minority among the laity, readily acquiesced in the measure. It implied no

of this treasure is then traced through various wars to Rome, where it is said now to be.

²¹ It has been suggested that the expression (1 Kings 12:28): "the king took counsel," only refers to deliberation in his own mind. But the view given in the text seems the more rational, consistent, and accordant with the language of the original.

less than a complete transformation of the religion of Jehovah, and that for a purely political object.

The danger that, if the people regularly resorted to the great festivals at Jerusalem, their allegiance might be won back to their rightful king, who held rule in the God-chosen capital, was too obvious not to have occurred to a mind even less suspicious than that of an Oriental despot, who had gained his throne by rebellion. To cut off this source of dynastic and even personal peril, Jeroboam, with the advice of his council, introduced a complete change in the worship of Israel. In so doing, his contention would probably be, that he had not abolished the ancient religion of the people, only given it a form better suited to present circumstances - one, moreover, derived from primitive national use, and sanctioned by no less an authority than that of Aaron, the first High-priest. ²² It was burdensome and almost impossible to go up to the central Sanctuary at Jerusalem. But there was the ancient symbol of the "golden calf," ²³ made by Aaron himself, under which the people had worshipped Jehovah in the wilderness.

Appealing, perhaps at the formal consecration of these symbols, to the very words which Aaron had used (Exodus 32:4), Jeroboam made two golden calves, and located them at the southern and the northern extremities of the territory of the ten tribes. This was the more easy, since there were both in the south and north "sacred" localities, associated in popular opinion with previous worship. Such in the extreme south was Beth-el - "the house of God and the gate of heaven" - consecrated by the twofold appearance of God to Jacob; set apart by the patriarch himself (Genesis 28:11-19; 35:1, 7, 9-15); and where of old Samuel had held solemn assemblies (1 Samuel 7:16). Similarly, in the extreme north Dan was a

²² The idea, that these golden calves of Jeroboam were intended as imitations of the cherubim over the ark (Speaker's Comment.), is manifestly untenable.

²³ It has been objected that Jeroboam could not have wished to have recalled to Israel the service of the golden calf in the wilderness, in view of the punishment which followed that sin. But the words and the fact clearly point to it; and many ways might be found of either ignoring or explaining away the consequences of Israel's conduct at that time.

"consecrated" place, where "strange worship" may have lingered from the days of Micah (Judges 18:30, 31).

The setting up of the golden calves as the symbol of Jehovah brought with it other changes. An "house of Bamoth," or Temple for the high-place altars, probably with priests' dwellings attached, was reared. The Levitical priesthood was extruded, either as inseparably connected with the old worship, or because it would not conform to the new order of things, and a new priesthood appointed, not confined to any tribe or family, but indiscriminately taken from all classes of the people,²⁴ the king himself apparently acting, in true heathen fashion, as Chief Pontiff (1 Kings 12:32, 33).²⁵

Lastly, the great Feast of Tabernacles was transferred from the 7th to the 8th month, probably as a more suitable and convenient time for a harvest-festival in the northern parts of Palestine, the date (the 15th) being, however, retained, as that of the full moon.

That this was virtually, and would in practice almost immediately become idolatry, is evident. Indeed, it is expressly attested in 2 Chronicles 11:15, where the service of the "Calves" is not only associated with that of the Bamoth, or high-place altars, but even with that of "goats"²⁶ - the ancient Egyptian worship of Pan under the form of a goat (Leviticus 17:7).

It is true, the text does not imply, as our Authorized Version suggests, that the new priests were taken "from the lowest of the people." But the emphatic and more detailed repetition of the mode of their appointment (1 Kings 12:31, comp. 13:33), of which apparently the only condition was to bring an offering of one young bullock and seven rams (2 Chronicles 13:9), enables us to

²⁴ Our Authorized Version renders "the lowest of the people." But this is not implied in the original, which uses an expression conveying the idea of all ranks and classes, in opposition to the Levites.

²⁵ This is implied in his offering the incense, which was the highest act in worship.

²⁶ So literally, and not "devils," as in our Authorized Version and according to the Rabbis.

judge on what class of people the conduct of the religious services must soon have devolved.

A more daring attempt against that God-ordained symbolical religion, the maintenance of which was the ultimate reason for Israel's call and existence - so to speak, Israel's very *raison d'être* - could not be conceived. It was not only an act of gross disobedience, but, as the sacred text repeatedly notes, a system devised out of Jeroboam's own heart, when every religious institution in Israel had been God-appointed, symbolical, and forming a unity of which no part could be touched without impairing the whole. It was a movement which, if we may venture so to say, called for immediate and unmistakable interposition from on high. Here, then, if anywhere, we may look for the miraculous, and that in its most startling manifestation. Nor was it long deferred.

It was, as we take it, the first occasion on which this new Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated, perhaps at the same time also the dedication of the new Temple and the inauguration of its services. Bethel was in festive array, and thronged by pilgrims - for no less a personage than the king himself was to officiate as Chief Pontiff on that occasion. Connecting, as we undoubtedly should do, the last verse of 1 Kings 12: with the first of chapter 13, and rendering it literally, we read that on this feast which he "made" (i.e. of his own devising) "to the children of Israel," the king "went up on the altar," that is, up the sloping ascent which led to the circuit around the altar on which the officiating priest stood. The sacrifices had already been offered, and their smoldering embers and fat had mingled with the ashes (1 Kings 13:3).²⁷ And now the most solemn and central part of the service was reached. The king went up the inclined plane to the middle of the altar²⁸ to burn the incense, when he was suddenly arrested, and the worshippers startled by a voice from among the crowd (comp. here the similar

²⁷ 1 Kings 13:3, not "ashes," as in the Authorized Version, but "fat" - or rather ashes laden with fat.

²⁸ Ver. 1 in the original: "Jeroboam stood upon the altar" - this because "going up" the inclined plane to the middle of the altar, he would stand on the circuit of the altar, when laying on it either sacrifices or incense.

event in John 7:37). It was a stranger who spoke, and, as we know him, a Judaeen, "a man of Elohim." He had come "in the word of Jehovah" (1 Kings 13:1) - not merely in charge of it, nor only in its constraining power, but as if the Word of Jehovah itself had come, and this "man of God" been carried in it to deliver the message which he "cried to the altar in the word of Jehovah" (ver. 2). It was to the spurious and rival altar that he spake, and not to the king - for it was a controversy with spurious worship, and King Jeroboam was as nothing before Jehovah.

That altar, and the policy which had reared it, would be shivered, the altar desecrated,²⁹ and that by a son of David³⁰ whereof he gave them immediate symbolic evidence that Jehovah had spoken by his mouth that day,³¹ by this "wondrous sight,"³² that the altar would be rent,

²⁹ The most effectual mode of desecration would be by the bones of dead men (comp. Numbers 19:16). For the fulfillment of this prediction, see 2 Kings 23:16.

³⁰ We would put the words in 1 Kings 13:2, "Josiah by name," within hyphens, thus: " - Josiah by name - ," as not those of the original prophecy, but of the writer of the Book of Kings, being added for the purpose of pointing to the fulfillment of that prediction. Our reasons for this view are: 1. That there is a similar, and in that case, unquestionable, explanatory addition by the writer in ver. 32, where the "cities of Samaria" are mentioned (see our note below); 2. That prophecy never deals in details; 3. That the present would be the only exception to this rule. For, the mention of Cyrus by name in Isaiah 44:28; 45:1, affords no parallel instance, since Cyrus, or Coresh, means "Sun," and may be regarded as the designation (appellation) of the Persian kings, which Cyrus afterwards made his own name (like Augustus Caesar). Keil, indeed, argues that Josiah was also an appellative title, meaning "Jehovah supports him" - but this explanation seems, to say the least, strained. There is no need to suppose that, contrary to the universal canon of prophecy, a prediction would give a name 300 years before the time. Of course, fully believing, as we do, in the reality of prophecy, we admit that this would be quite possible; but on the grounds mentioned, and on others which will readily suggest themselves, it seems so unlikely, that we have adopted a view, supported, if not suggested, by the reference to Samaria in ver. 35. True and reverent faith in Divine revelation will make us only the more careful in our study of its exact meaning.

³¹ 1 Kings 13:3 reads: "This is the portent (marvelous sign) that Jehovah hath spoken" (not "which Jehovah hath spoken," as in our Authorized Version).

³² The Hebrew word means a marvelous sign.

and the ashes laden with the fat of the sacrifices poured out.

Arrested by this uncompromising announcement from one whom he regarded as a daring fanatical intruder, the king turned quickly round, and stretching out his hand towards him, commanded, "Seize him!" But already a mightier Hand than King Jeroboam's was stretched out. Now, if ever, would Jehovah vindicate His authority, prove His Word, and show before all the people that He, Whose authority they had cast off, was the Living God. Then and there must it be shown, in the idol-temple, at the first consecration of that spurious altar, at the first false feast, and upon King Jeroboam, in the pomp of his splendor and the boastfulness of his supposed power (comp. here Acts 12:22, 23). The king had put forth his hand, but he could not draw it back, the Hand of the LORD held it. Some mysterious stroke had fallen upon him; and while he thus stood, himself a sign, the top of the altar suddenly parted, and the ashes, clogged and heavy with the fat of idol-sacrifices, poured out around him. No hand was stretched out to seize the "man of God". Nor was there need of it - the "man of God" had neither design nor desire to escape. Rather was it now the king's turn, not to command but to entreat. In the expressive language of the original, "And the king answered" (to the unspoken word of Jehovah in the stroke that had arrested his hand), and said, Soften now the Face of Jehovah thy God, and make entreaty on my behalf, and (or, that) "my hand shall return to me."

It was as he craved - for the prophecy and controversy were not with the king, but with the Altar. And all this had been only a sign, which had fulfilled its purpose, and would fulfill it still more, if the same Power that had appeared in the sudden stroke would again become manifest in its equally sudden removal. As for Jeroboam, Jehovah had no controversy with him then and there, nor indeed anywhere. The judgment of his sins would soon enough overtake him and his house. It might, indeed, seem passing strange that the king could now invite this "man of God" to his palace and table, and even promise him "a reward," if we did not bear in mind the circumstances of the times, and the heathen idea of miracles. To the heathen

the miraculous, as direct Divine manifestation, was not something extraordinary and unexpected. Heathenism - may we not say, the ancient world? - expected the miraculous; and hence in those times God's manifestation by miracles might almost be designated not as an extraordinary, but, according to the then notions, as the ordinary mode of teaching. Moreover, heathenism regarded miracles as simply manifestations of power, and the worker of miracles as a magician, possessed of power - the question being, whether the power of the deity whom he represented was greater than that of other gods, or not. It was, no doubt, in this light that Jeroboam regarded this "man of Elohim" the name Elohim itself expressing especially "power."³³ This, as well as knowledge of the character of his own "prophets," and perhaps a secret hope that he might attach him to himself by a "reward," prompted the words of the king. He would do honor to the man of power, and, through him, to the deity whom he represented - perhaps even gain the man of God.³⁴

It need scarcely be said, that the mere fact of the "man of God" entering the king's palace and sharing his feast, probably a sacrificial idol-feast would not only have been contrary to the whole scope and spirit of his embassy, but have destroyed the moral effect of the scene enacted before the people. So, to mention a much lower parallelism is the moral effect of all Christian testimony, whether by word or life, annulled by every act of conformity to, and fellowship with the world (comp. Romans 12:1, 2). But in the present instance any danger of this kind had by anticipation been averted. God had given His messenger express command, neither to eat bread nor to drink water in that place, nor even to return by the way that he had come. These directions had, of course, a much deeper and symbolical meaning. They indicated that Bethel lay under the ban; that no fellowship of any kind was to be held with it; and that even the way by which the

³³ In contradistinction to Jehovah, which added the idea of the covenant to that of power.

³⁴ I prefer this to the view that Jeroboam's conduct was merely prompted by the wish to nullify the effect upon the people. Such a motive seems, psychologically, unlikely in the circumstances.

messenger of God had come, was to be regarded as consecrated, and not to be retraced.³⁵

In the discharge of the commission entrusted to him, the "man of God," who had "come in the word of Jehovah," was to consider himself as an impersonal being - till he was beyond the place to which, and the road by which he had been sent. Whatever view, therefore, we may take of his after-conduct, it cannot at least surprise us, that at that moment no earthly temptation could have induced him to accept the king's offer (1 Kings 13:8, 9).

Yet, as we think of it, the answer of the "man of God" seems to us disappointing. It is like that of Balaam to the messengers of Balak (Numbers 22:13, 18), and yet we know that all along his heart was with them, and that he afterwards yielded to their solicitations, to his own destruction. We would have expected more from the "man of God" than a mere recital of his orders - some expression of feeling like that of Daniel under analogous circumstances (Daniel 5:17). But, in repeating before all the people the express command which God had given him, the "man of God," like Balaam of old, also pronounced his own necessary doom, if he swerved from the injunction laid upon him. He had borne testimony - and by the testimony of his own mouth he must be content to be judged; he was quite certain of the command which God had laid upon him, and by that certainty he must abide.

And at first it seemed as if he would have done so. His message delivered, he left Bethel by another way than that which he had come. Among his astonished audience that day had been the sons of an old resident in Bethel, whose real character it is not easy to read.

In the sacred narrative he is throughout designated as Navi, or Prophet (literally: one who wells forth"), while the Divine messenger from Judah is always described as "man of Elohim" - a distinction which must have its meaning. On their return from the idol-temple, the eldest of his sons

³⁵ The general explanation, that this was added, in order that it should not be known what route he took, so that he might be fetched back, needs no refutation.

³⁶ described to the old prophet the scene which they had witnessed. Inquiring from them what road the "man of God" had taken - which they, and probably many others had watched ³⁷ - he hastily rode after him, and overtook him.

The "man of Elohim" was resting under "the terebinth" - apparently a well-known spot where travelers were wont to unlade their beasts of burden, and to halt for shelter and repose (a kind of "Travelers' Rest"). Repeating the invitation of Jeroboam, he received the same answer as the king. There could be even less hesitation now, since the "man of God" had actually left Bethel, nor could he possibly have deemed it right to return thither. Upon this the old prophet addressed him as a colleague, and falsely pretended, not indeed that Jehovah, but that "an angel in the word of Jehovah," had directed him to fetch him back, when the other immediately complied. As the two sat at table in Bethel, suddenly "the word of Jehovah was upon the prophet who had brought him back." Because he had "resisted (rebelled against) the mouth of Jehovah, and not kept the commandment which Jehovah had commanded him," his dead body should not come into the sepulcher ³⁸ of his fathers.

Startling as such an announcement must have been, it would set two points vividly before him: his disobedience and his impending punishment - the latter very real, according to the views prevailing at the time (Genesis 47:30; 49:29; 50:25; 2 Samuel 19:37, etc.), although not

implying either immediate or even violent death. It is very surprising to - us and indicative of the absence of the higher moral and spiritual elements - that this announcement was not followed by any expression of sorrow or repentance, but that the meal seems to have continued uninterrupted to the end. Did the old prophet seem to the other only under an access of ecstatic frenzy? Did the fact that he announced not immediate death blunt the edge of his message? Had disobedience to the Divine command carried as its consequence immediate spiritual callousness? Or had the return of the "man of God" to Bethel after all been the result of a deeper estrangement from God, of which the first manifestation had already appeared in what we have described as his strangely insufficient answer to Jeroboam's invitation and offer? These are necessarily only suggestions - and yet it seems to us as if all these elements had been present and at work to bring about the final result.

The meal was past, and the "old prophet" saddled his ass to convey his guest to his destination. But the end of the journey was never reached. As some travelers were passing that way, they saw an unwonted spectacle which must have induced them to hasten on their journey. Close by the roadside lay a dead body, and beside it stood the ass ³⁹ which the unhappy man had ridden - both guarded, as it were, by the lion, who had killed the man, evidently by the weight of his paw as he knocked him down, ⁴⁰ without, however, rending him, or attempting to feed on his carcass. Who the dead man was, the travelers seem not to have known, nor would they, of course, pause by the road.

On passing through Bethel - which from the narrative does not seem to have been their ultimate destination, but the first station which they reached they naturally "talked in the town" about what they had just seen in its neighborhood. When the

³⁶ In the second clause of ver. 11 the singular is used, "his son," not as in our Authorized Version, "sons." The plural which follows shows, however, that several sons were present, though one was the spokesman. From the presence of the "old prophet" in Bethel, and that of Ahijah in Shiloh, we infer that, if there was a migration of pious laity into the territory of Rehoboam - which, however, is not expressly stated in 2 Chronicles 11:16 - it must have been that of a minority.

³⁷ This disposes of the argument quoted in the previous page as to the reason why the "man of God" was to return by another road.

³⁸ The sepulchers in Palestine were not like ours, but generally rockhewn, and consisted of an ante-chamber and an inner cave in which the bodies were deposited in niches, the entrance to the sepulcher being guarded by a stone. For details, comp. Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ, p. 171.

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⁴⁰ This is clearly implied by the word "broken" in 1 Kings 13:26, marginal rendering.

rumor reached the "old prophet," he immediately understood the meaning of all. Riding to the spot, he reverently carried home with him the dead body of the "man of God," mourned over, and buried him in his own sepulcher, marking the place by a monumental pillar to distinguish this from other tombs, and to keep the event in perpetual remembrance. But to his sons he gave solemn direction to lay him in the same tomb - in the rock-niche by the side of that in which the "man of God" rested. This was to be a dying testimony to "the man of God" that his embassy of God had been real, and that surely the "thing would be" (that it would happen) "which he had cried in the word of Jehovah against the altar which (was) at Bethel, and against all the Bamoth-houses which (are) in the cities of Samaria."

With this profession of faith in the truth of Jehovah's message, and in the power of the LORD certainly to bring it to pass at some future time, would the old prophet henceforth live. With it would he die and be buried - laying his bones close to those of the "man of God," sharing his grave, and nestling, as it were, for shelter in the shadow of that great Reality which "the man of God" had cast over Bethel. So would he, in life and death, speak of, and cling to Jehovah - as the True and the Living God.

More than three hundred years later, and nearly a century had passed since the children of Israel had been carried away from their homes. Then it was that what, centuries before, the "man of God" had foretold, became literally true (2 Kings 23:15-18). The idol-temple, in which Jeroboam had stood in his power and glory on that opening day, was burned by Josiah; the Bamoth were cast down; and on that altar, to defile it, they gathered from the neighboring sepulchers the bones of its former worshippers, and burned them there. Yet in their terrible search of vengeance one monument arrested their attention. They asked of them at Bethel. It marked the spot where the bones of "the man of God" and of his host the "old prophet" of Samaria⁴¹ lay.

⁴¹ The mention of Samaria here and in 1 Kings 13:32 must have been explanatory additions by the writer, since Samaria was only built by Omri (1 Kings 16:24). This, of course, confirms the view we have expressed about the mention of the

And they reverently left the bones in their resting-places, side by side - as in life, death, and burial, so still and for aye witnesses to Jehovah; and safe in their witness-bearing. But three centuries and more between the prediction and the final fulfillment: and in that time symbolic rending of the altar, changes, wars, final ruin, and desolation! And still the word seemed to slumber all those centuries of silence, before it was literally fulfilled. There is something absolutely overawing in this absence of all haste on the part of God, in this certainty of the final event, with apparent utter unconcern of what may happen during the long centuries that intervene, which makes us tremble as we realize how much of buried seed of warning or of promise may sleep in the ground, and how unexpectedly, but how certainly, it will ripen as in one day into a harvest of judgment or of mercy.

But too many questions and lessons are involved in this history to pass it without further study. Who was this "old prophet?" Was he a true prophet of Jehovah? And why did he thus "lie" to the destruction of the "man of God?" Again, why was such severe punishment meted out to the "man of God?" Did he deserve any for what might have been only an error of judgment? And why did his tempter and seducer apparently escape all punishment? To begin with the old "prophet" of Bethel - we do not regard him as simply a false prophet, whose object it was to seduce "the man of God," either from jealousy or to destroy the effect of his mission.⁴²

On the other hand, it seems equally incorrect to speak of him as a true prophet of God, roused from sinful conformity with those around by the sudden appearance of the Judean messenger of Jehovah, and anxious to recover himself by fellowship with "the man of God," even if that intercourse could only be secured by means of a falsehood.

Nor would we describe his conduct as intended to try the steadfast obedience of the "man of God."

name of Josiah. It need scarcely be stated, that this in no way invalidates the truthfulness of the narrative, but rather confirms it.

⁴² This, in one form or another, is the view of Josephus, the Targum, and of most of the Rabbinical and Christian commentators.

The truth seems to lie between these extreme opinions. Putting aside the general question of heathen divination, which we have not sufficient materials satisfactorily to answer, it is at least certain that not every Navi was a prophet of Jehovah. That God should have sent a message through one who was not His prophet, need not surprise us when we recall the history of Balaam. Moreover, it was peculiarly appropriate, that the announcement of guilt and punishment should come to the "man of God" through the person who had misled him by false pretense of an angelic command, and at the very meal to which the "man of God" should never have sat down. Again, it is evident that, from the moment he heard of the scene in the idol-temple, the "old prophet" believed in the genuineness and authority of the message brought to Bethel. Every stage in the history deepened this conviction, until at last it became, so to speak, the fundamental fact of his religious life, which must have determined his whole after-conduct. May it not have been that this "old Navi" was one of the fruits of the "Schools of the Prophets" - the prophetic order having apparently been widely revived during the later part of Solomon's reign? Settling in Bethel (as Lot in Sodom), he may have gradually lapsed into toleration of evil - as the attendance of his children in the idol-temple seems to imply - without, however, surrendering his character, perhaps his office of "Prophet," the more so as the service of Jehovah might be supposed to be only altered in form, not abolished, by the adoption of the symbol of the Golden Calves. In that case his immediate recognition of the "man of God," and his deepening conviction may be easily understood; his earnest desire to claim and have fellowship with a direct messenger of God seems natural; and even his unscrupulous use of falsehood is accounted for.

These considerations will help to show that there was an essential difference between him and "the man of God," and that the punishment which overtook the latter bears no possible relation to the apparent impunity of the "old prophet." That terrible judgment ought to be viewed from two different points, as it were, absolutely - from heaven downwards; and relatively to the person whom it overtook - from earth heavenwards. The

most superficial consideration will convince, that, from the nature of the case, the authority of God must have been vindicated, and that by a patent and terrible judgment, if the object and meaning of the message which He had sent were not to be nullified. When "the man of God" publicly proclaimed in the temple the terms which God had prescribed, he pronounced his own sentence in case of disobedience. Besides, the main idea underlying the Divine employment of such messengers was that of their absolute and unquestioning execution of the exact terms of their commission. This essential condition of the prophetic office it was the more necessary to vindicate in Bethel, as also at the commencement of a period marked by a succession of prophets in Israel, who, in the absence of the God-ordained services, were to keep alive the knowledge of Jehovah, and, by their warnings and teaching, to avert, if possible, the catastrophe of national judgment which would overtake apostate Israel.

As regards "the man of God" himself, we have already noticed the increasing spiritual callousness, consequent upon his first unfaithfulness. But putting this aside, surely there never could have been any serious question in his mind as to his duty. By his own testimony, he had received express and unmistakable command of God, which Scripture again and again repeats, for the sake of emphasis; and his conduct should have been guided on the plain principle, that an obvious and known duty can never be set aside by another seeming duty. Besides, what evidence had he that an angel had really spoken to the "old prophet;" or even that his tempter was a "prophet" at all, or, if a prophet, acted in the prophetic spirit? All these points are so obvious, that the conduct of the "man of God" would seem almost incredible, if we did not recall how often in every-day life we are tempted to turn aside from the plain demands of right and duty by a false call in contravention to it. In all moral and spiritual questions it is ever most dangerous to reason, simple obedience and not argument is the only safe path (comp. here Galatians 1:8). One duty can never contravene another and the plainly known and clear command of God must silence all side-questions.

Viewing the conduct of the "man of God" as a fall and a sin, all becomes plain. He had publicly announced his duty, and he had publicly contravened it; and his punishment was, through the remarkable, though not miraculous, circumstances under which it overtook him, equally publicly known. Throughout the whole history there is, so to speak, a remarkable equipoise in the circumstances of his sin and of his punishment, as also in the vindication of God's authority.

And yet even so, the moral effect of God's message was apparently weakened through the sin of His messenger. So terribly fatal in their consequences are our sins, even when publicly punished. For it is scarcely possible to believe that, had it not been so, Jeroboam would "after this thing" have uninterruptedly continued his former course of defiance of the authority of God. But here the history also turns from Israel to its wretched king, and in a narrative of deepest pathos shows us at the same time the punishment of his sin, and the wonderful tenderness of God's dealings towards those who, in the midst of greatest temptations, have kept their hearts true to Him, and are preserved by His mercy from the evil to come. And most comforting is it to know that God has and keeps His own - even though it be in the family of a Jeroboam, and that true piety finds its respectful acknowledgment, even among a people so sunken as was Israel at that time.

If it were necessary to show how unhappiness and sin go hand in hand, the history about to be told would furnish ample evidence of it. The main reason of its insertion in the Biblical record is, of course, that it gave occasion to announce the Divine punishment upon the race of Jeroboam, as having traversed the fundamental condition on which the possibility of the new dynasty rested (1 Kings 11:38). At the same time, it seems also to cast an important side-light on the transaction between Ahijah the prophet and Jeroboam, when the former first announced to him his future elevation to the kingdom (1 Kings 11:29-39). Keil renders 1 Kings 14:7. "Thus saith Jehovah, the God of Israel: Therefore, because thou hast elevated thyself from amongst the people, and I have given thee ruler over My people Israel."

If this rendering is correct, it would imply that his elevation, or leadership of Israel, was in the first place entirely Jeroboam's own act, and that, having so elevated himself and assumed the leadership, God afterwards bestowed on him the rule to which he aspired, leaving for future trial the fitness of his race for the kingdom.

But, besides the higher Divine meaning of this history, it possesses also a deep human interest. It gives us a glimpse into the inner family life of the wretched king, as, divested of crown and purple, and having cast aside statecraft and religious falsehood, he staggers under a sore blow. For once we see the man, not the king, and, as each man appears truest, when stricken to the heart by a sorrow which no earthly power can turn aside. From Shechem the royal residence had been transferred to the ancient Canaanite city (Joshua 12:24) Tirzah, the beautiful (Cant. 6. 4), two hours to the north of Samaria, amidst cultivated fruit-and-olive-clad hills, up on a swelling height, with glorious outlook over the hills and valleys of rich Samaria.

The royal palace seems to have stood at the entering in of the city (comp. 1 Kings 14:17 with ver. 12). But within its stately apartments reigned silence and sorrow. Abijah, Jeroboam's son, and apparently the intended successor to his throne, lay sick. He seems like the last link that bound Jeroboam to his former better self. The very name of the child- Abijah, "Jehovah is my Father," or else "my Desire" - indicates this, even if it were not for the touching notice, that in him was "found a good thing towards Jehovah, the God of Israel, in the house of Jeroboam" (ver. 13) We can conceive how this "good thing" may have sprung up; but to keep and to cause it to grow in such surroundings, surely needed the gracious tending of the Good Husbandman. It was the one green spot in Jeroboam's life and home; the one germ of hope. And as his father loved him truly, so all Israel had set their hopes on him. Upon the inner life of this child - its struggles and its victories - lies the veil of Scripture silence; and best that it should be so. But now his pulses were beating quick and weak, and that life of love and hope seemed fast ebbing. None with the father in those hours of darkness - neither counselor, courtier,

prophet, nor priest - save the child's mother. As the two kept sad watch, helpless and hopeless, the past, to which this child bound him, must have come back to Jeroboam. One event in it chiefly stood out: it was his first meeting with Ahijah the Shilonite. That was a true prophet - bold, uncompromising withal. With that impulse of despair which comes upon men in their agony, when all the delusions of a misspent life are swept away, he turned to the opening of his life, so full of hope and happy possibility, the ambition had urged him upon the path of reckless sacrifice of all that had been dearest and holiest; the unlimited possession had dazzled his sight and the sound of flattery deafened his ears. As to Saul of old on the eve of that fatal battle, when God and man had become equally silent to him, the figure of Samuel had stood out - that which to us might seem the most unlikely he could have wished to encounter - so now to Jeroboam that of Ahijah. Could he have wished to blot out, as it were, all that had intervened, and to stand before the prophet as on the day when first he met him, when great but not yet unholy thoughts rose within him? Had he some unspoken hope of him who had first announced to him his reign? Or did he only in sheer despair long to know what would come to the child, even though he were to learn the worst? Be this as it may, he must have word from Ahijah, whatever it might be.

In that hour he has no friend nor helper save the mother of his child. She must go, in her love, to the old prophet in Shiloh. But how dare she, Jeroboam's wife, present herself there? Nay, the people also must not know what or whither her errand was. And so she must disguise herself as a poor woman, carrying with her, indeed, as customary, a gift to the prophet, but one such as only the poorest in the land would offer. While alone and in humble disguise the wife of Jeroboam goes on her heavy embassy, across the hills of Samaria, past royal Shechem, Another has already brought her message to Shiloh. No need for the queen to disguise herself, so far as Ahijah was concerned, since age had blinded his eyes. But Jehovah had spoken to His aged servant, and charged him concerning this matter. And as he heard the sound of her feet within the door, he knew who his unseen visitor was, and addressed

her not as queen but as the wife of Jeroboam. Stern, terrible things they were which he was commissioned to tell her; and with unswerving faithfulness and unbending truth he spake them, though his heart must have bled within him as he repeated what himself called "hard tidings."

All the more deeply must the aged prophet have felt them, that it was he who had announced to Jeroboam his future elevation. They concerned Jeroboam; but they also touched every heart-string in the wife and the mother, and must well nigh have torn each one of them as they swept across her. First: ⁴³ an uncompromising recital of the past, and a sternly true representation of the present - all glare, dazzle, and self-delusion dispelled, until it stood in naked reality before her.

Only two persons are in this picture, Jehovah and Jeroboam - all else is in the far background. That is enough; and now once in full sight of those two persons, the wife, the mother, must hear it all, though her ears tingle and her knees tremble. Not this child only, but every child, nay, every descendant, down to the meanest, whether it be child or adult ⁴⁴ - swept away: "And I will sweep out after the house of Jeroboam, as one sweepeth out dirt until it is quite gone" (1 Kings 14:10). ⁴⁵

And not only this, but also horrible judgment; the carcasses of her children lying like carrion in street and on field, their flesh torn and eaten by the wild, unclean dogs that prowl about, or picked from their limbs by birds of prey who swoop round them with hoarse croaking. ⁴⁶

⁴³ Commentators have noted in the ten verses of Ahijah's message (vers. 7-16) a rhythmic arrangement, viz., twice 5 verses - the first stanza (vers. 7-11) consisting of 3 + 2, the last stanza (vers. 12-16) of 2 + 3 verses.

⁴⁴ This seems to be the correct meaning of a proverbial expression which scarcely occurs except during the period from the time of David to that of Jehu.

⁴⁵ This is the literal, and, as will be perceived, much more forcible rendering.

⁴⁶ Comp. here Exodus 20:4, 5; Deuteronomy 28:26. Even the alteration of this latter passage in 1 Kings 14:11 is in favor of the earlier age of the Book of Deuteronomy - since the addition about the "dogs" points to Eastern town-life, where the wild dogs act as scavengers of cities.

Thus far for Jeroboam. And now as for the child that lay sick in the palace of Tirzah - it shall be in God's keeping, removed from the evil to come. As her feet touched the threshold of her doomed home, it would die. As it were, such heavy tidings shall not be brought within where he sleeps; its terrors shall not darken his bed. Before they can reach him, he shall be beyond their shadow and in the light. But around that sole-honored grave all Israel shall be the mourners, and God Himself wills to put this mark of honor upon His one child in that now cursed family. Lastly, as for apostate Israel, another king raised up to execute the judgment of God - nay, all this not merely in the dim future, but the scene seems to shift, and the prophet sees it already in the present.⁴⁷

Israel shaken as a reed in the water by wind and waves; Israel uprooted from their land, - cast away and, scattered among the heathen beyond the river, and given up to be trampled under foot. Such is the end of the sins of Jeroboam and of his people; such, in the bold figure of Scripture, is the sequel of casting Jehovah "behind their back."⁴⁸ Of the further course of this history we know no more. The queen and mother went back, stricken, to her home; and it was as the prophet had told her from Jehovah. And this literal fulfillment would be to her forever afterwards the terrible pledge of what was yet to come.

Nor do we read any more of Jeroboam. It almost seems as if Holy Scripture had nothing further to say of him, not even concerning his later and disastrous war with the son of Rehoboam (2 Chronicles 13:2-20). That is told in connection with the reign of the second king of Judah. Of Jeroboam we only read that he "reigned two and twenty years," that "he slept with his fathers," and that "Nadab his son reigned in his stead."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ The words of the original are somewhat difficult to render on account of the abruptness of the speech; but the above, which corresponds with our Authorized Version, gives the correct meaning.

⁴⁸ It is remarkable, that the same strong expression occurs only in Ezekiel 23:35, in reference to the same sin of apostate Judah as followed by the same punishment as that of Israel.

⁴⁹ We subjoin the following as the most interesting of the Rabbinical notices about Jeroboam (comp. the Nachalath

V_12 - ABIJAH AND ASA, KINGS OF JUDAH
Accession of Abijah — his idolatry — war between Judah and Israel — Abijah's address to Israel and victory — deaths of Jeroboam and of Abijah — accession of Asa — religious reformation in Judah — invasion by Zerah the Ethiopian — victory of Zephathah — Azariah's message to the army of Asa — great sacrificial feast at Jerusalem — renewal of the covenant with Jehovah.

1 Kings 15:1-15; 2 Chronicles 13 to 15

JEROBOAM did not only survive Rehoboam, but he witnessed the accession of two other kings of Judah, Abijah and Asa. The reign of Abijah⁵⁰ was very brief. Both in 1 Kings 15:2 and in 2 Chronicles 13:2 it is said to have lasted three years - an expression which must be understood according to this canon laid down by the Rabbis, that the commencement of a year in the reign of a king is to be reckoned as a full year. Thus, as Abijah ascended the throne in the eighteenth (1 Kings 15:1), and Asa in the twentieth (ver. 9) year of Jeroboam's reign, it follows that the former actually reigned only somewhat over two years. Two things are specially noticed concerning Abijah, his relation towards Jehovah (in 1 Kings

Shimoni, vol. i., p. 37, b and c): The name of Jeroboam is explained as "making contest among the people," either in reference to their relationship to God, or as between Israel and Judah (Sanh. 101, b). His father Nebat is identified with Micah, and even with Sheba, the son of Bichri (Sanh. ib.). The Talmud records various legendary accounts of Jeroboam's quarrel with Solomon, in which the former appears more in the right (Sanh. ib.), although he is blamed alike for the public expression of his feelings and for his rebellion. That rebellion is regarded as the outward manifestation of long-existing disunion. The government of Jeroboam is looked upon as distinguished by firmness, and he is praised for his wisdom, which had given rise to great hope. Pride is stated to have been the reason of his apostasy from God. (Sanh. 102 a). The promise to Jacob in Genesis 35:11, "Kings shall come out of thee," is applied in Bereshith R. 82 (ed. Warsh. p. 146, b), to Jeroboam; but he is regarded as not having share in the world to come. Seven such are mentioned: three kings - Jeroboam, Ahab, and Manasseh, and four private persons - Balaam, Doeg, Ahithophel, and Gehazi (Sanh. 90, a). He is also mentioned among those who are condemned eternally to Gehenna in Rosh ha-Shanah, 17, a.

⁵⁰ Abijah. - "my father Jehovah!" Two other forms of the name occur. In the Book of Kings he is always called Abijam, while in 2 Chronicles 13:21 he is also designated (in the Hebrew), Abijahu. Probably, Abijam (in 1 Kings) was the older form - and it is not impossible that it may have been altered into, Abijah, when that monarch made his loud profession of Jehovahism (2 Chronicles 13:4, etc.).

15:3- 5), and his relation to the kingdom of Jeroboam (2 Chronicles 13:2-20).

To begin with the former. It is stated that "he walked in all the sins of his father," and that "his heart was not perfect with Jehovah his God." These two statements are not explanatory of, but supplementary to, each other. We know that Rehoboam had not abolished the service of Jehovah (see, for example, 1 Kings 14:28), but that, by its side, a spurious worship had been tolerated, if not encouraged, which, in the view of Holy Scripture, was equal to idolatry. In this matter Rehoboam had not only followed the example of his father Solomon, during his later years, but greatly increased the evil which had then begun. A similar remark applies to the reign of Abijah, as compared with that of Rehoboam. That the idolatry of the reign of Rehoboam had grown both worse in character and more general in practice under that of Abijah, appears from the notices of the reformation instituted by his successor, Asa. The former circumstance is implied in the terms by which the idolatry of that period is described (2 Chronicles 14:3, 5), and by the circumstance that "the queen-mother" (Maachah, Abijah's mother and Asa's grandmother),⁵¹ who under Abijah held the official rank of Gevirah, "Queen" (the modern Sultana Valide), had made and set up "a horror for Asherah" - some horrible wooden representation, equally vile and idolatrous in its character.

Again, that idolatry had become more widely spread, and that its hold was stronger, we infer from the fact that, despite Asa's example, admonitions, and exertions (2 Chronicles 14:4, 5), "the high places did not cease" (1 Kings 15:14). This progressive spiritual decline under the reigns of Solomon, Rehoboam, and Abijah was so marked as to have deserved the removal of the family of David from the throne, had it not been for God's faithfulness to His covenant-promises (1 Kings 15:4, 5). But, although such was the state of religion, Abijah not only made loud profession of the worship of Jehovah, but even brought votive

offerings to the Temple, probably of part of the spoil taken in war (1 Kings 15:15; comp. 2 Chronicles 13:16-19).

Concerning the relations of Judah to the neighboring kingdom of Israel, it may be said that the chronic state of warfare which had existed during the time of Rehoboam now changed into one of open hostilities. Two reasons for this may be given. Abijah was a much more vigorous ruler than his father, and the power of Egypt, on which Jeroboam relied for support, seems at that time to have decreased. This we gather, not only from the non-interference of Egypt in the war between Abijah and Jeroboam, but from the fact that, when Egypt at length sought to recover its lost ascendancy, it was under the rule of Zerah the Ethiopian (probably Osorkon II.), who was not the son, but the son-in-law, of the preceding monarch (2 Chronicles 14:9); and we know the fate that overtook the huge, undisciplined army which Zerah led.

The language of the sacred narrative (2 Chronicles 13:2, 3) implies, that the war between Judah and Israel was begun by Abijah. On both sides a levy of all capable of bearing arms was raised, though, so far as the numerical strength of the two armies was concerned, the response seems not to have been so universal in Judah as in Israel.⁵²

⁵² The numbers: 400,000 for Judah, 800,000 for Israel, and 500,000 killed, have always seemed a difficulty. Bishop Kennicott and others have regarded these numerals as a copyist's mistake. But it seems difficult to imagine three consecutive errors in copying. Professor Rawlinson (in the Speaker's Commentary, vol. 3., p. 306) thinks, that both the combatants and the slain represent those engaged throughout the whole war. But this scarcely removes the difficulty. Two points may help our better understanding of the matter, though we would only suggest them hypothetically. First, comparing these numbers with more exact numerical details, as in 2 Chronicles 5-7, and 12, they read rather like what might be called "round numbers" than as precise numeration. Secondly, comparing these numbers with the census under King David (2 Samuel 24:9), we find that the number of the Israelites is exactly the same in both cases, while that of Judah is larger by 100,000 in the census of David than in the army of Abijah, though it included Benjamin. If we assume that Abijah invaded Israel with a regular army - "began the war with an army of war-heroes," and that in defense Jeroboam raised a levy of all capable of bearing arms, we can understand the use of these "round numbers," derived from a previous census. In that case the number of the slain would represent rather the proportion

⁵¹ As Maachah, the daughter (granddaughter) of Abishalom (Absalom) was the mother of Abijah, she must have been the grandmother of Asa. She is designated as "Queen," or rather (in the original) as Gevirah, which is an official title.

But perhaps the seeming discrepancy may be explained by the necessity of leaving strong garrisons in the south to watch the Egyptian frontier (comp. 2 Chronicles 14:9). The two armies met at the boundary of the two kingdoms, though, as we judge, within the territory of Israel. They camped in close proximity, only separated by Mount Zemaraim, a height to the east of Bethel and some distance north of Jericho, forming part of the ridge known as "Mount Ephraim," which stretched from the plain of Esdraelon southwards.

From this height Abijah addressed the army of Israel just before the battle began, in the hope of securing their voluntary submission, or at least weakening their resistance. Ignoring all that told against himself, ⁵³ Abijah tried to impress on his opponents that right was wholly on his side. ⁵⁴

In language full of irony he set before them their weakness, as the necessary result of their apostasy from Jehovah, the God of their fathers, and of their adoption of a worship neither conformable to their ancient faith nor even respectable in the sight of men. Lastly, he loudly protested that, since Judah had gone to war under the leadership of Jehovah and in the manner appointed by Him, Israel was really fighting against Jehovah, the God of their fathers, and could not expect success. Whatever hollowness there may have been in this profession on the part of Abijah, it was at least the true war-cry of Israel which he raised. It found an echo in the hearts of his followers. In vain Jeroboam, by a cleverly executed movement, attacked Judah both in front and rear. The terror excited by finding themselves surrounded only led the people to cry unto Jehovah (2 Chronicles 13:14), and He was faithful to His promise (Numbers 10:9). The shout of the combatants mingled with the blast of the priests' trumpets, as Judah rushed to the attack. Israel fled in wild disorder, and a terrible carnage ensued. The fugitives were followed by the army

of those who fell during the war than a numerically exact statement.

⁵³ Such as the conditions of David's royalty (Psalm 132:12), the sin of Solomon, the folly and sin of Rehoboam, and his own unfaithfulness to the LORD.

⁵⁴ "A covenant of salt" - comp. Leviticus 2:13; Numbers 18:19.

of Judah, and Abijah recovered from Israel the border-cities, ⁵⁵ with the districts around them. In consequence of this victory the power of Jeroboam was henceforth on the wane, and that of Abijah in the ascendancy. Not long afterwards Jehovah struck Jeroboam, either suddenly or with lingering disease, of which he died. He had, however survived his rival, Abijah, ⁵⁶ for more than two years.

Abijah was succeeded on the throne of Judah by his son, Asa, probably at the time a boy of only ten or eleven years. ⁵⁷ This may in part account for his pious up-bringing, as, during his minority he would be chiefly under the official guardianship of the High-priest (comp. 2 Chronicles 22:12).

It also explains how a bold, resolute woman, such as Maachah, could still retain her official position as Gevirah, or "queen-mother," until, on attaining majority, the young king commenced his religious reformation. During the first ten years of Asa's reign the land had rest (2 Chronicles 14:1). While devoutly acknowledging the goodness of God in this, it is easy to understand the outward circumstances by which it was brought about. The temporary weakness of Egypt, the defeat of Jeroboam, and an alliance which Abijah seems to have contracted with Syria (2 Chronicles 16:3), as well as afterwards the rapid succession of rival dynasties in Israel, sufficiently explain it. For, during his long reign of forty-one years, Asa saw no fewer than seven kings ascend the throne of Israel. ⁵⁸

⁵⁵ The localization of "Jeshanah" and "Ephrain" has not been satisfactorily made out. But in all probability these towns were not at a great distance from Bethel.

⁵⁶ The expression (2 Chronicles 13:21) "Abijah waxed mighty," or rather "strengthened himself," may also refer to his league with Syria (2 Chronicles 16:3). The notice of his wives and children includes, of course, an earlier period of his life.

⁵⁷ If Rehoboam was twenty-one years old at his accession, and reigned eighteen years, and then after two or three years was followed by his grandson, the latter could scarcely have been more than ten or eleven years old.

⁵⁸ At his accession Jeroboam reigned in Israel. The other seven were: Nadab, Baasha, Elah, Zimri, Tibni, Omri, and Ahab. These seven kings represented four rival dynasties.

The first work which Asa took in hand was a thorough religious reformation; his next, the strengthening of the defenses of the country. For this the temporary state of security prevailing offered a happy opportunity - "the land" being "still before them" - open and free from every enemy, though it was not difficult to foresee that such would not long be the case. And, as king and people owned that this time of rest had been granted them by Jehovah, so their preparations against future attacks were carried on in dependence upon Him. The period of trial came only too soon.

An almost countless Egyptian host, under the leadership of Zerah, the Ethiopian, swarmed into Judah. Advancing by the southwest, through the border of the Philistines, who, no doubt, made common cause with the Egyptians (2 Chronicles 14:14), they appeared before Mareshah (comp. Joshua 15:44).

This was one of the border fortresses which Jeroboam had built (2 Chronicles 11:8). The natural capabilities of the place and its situation, so near the southwestern angle of the country, and almost midway between Hebron and Ashdod, must have marked it as one of the most important strategical points in the Jewish line of defensive works against Philistia, or rather, against Egypt. About two miles north of Mareshah a beautiful valley debauches from between the hills.

This is the valley of Zephathah, where the relieving army of Asa, coming from the northeast, now took up its position. Here a decisive battle took place, which ended in the complete rout of the Egyptians. It has been well noted, that this is the only occasion on which the armies of Judah ventured to meet, and with success, either Egypt or Babylon in the open field (not behind fortifications).

On the only other occasion when a battle in the open was fought (2 Chronicles 25:20-24), it ended in the signal defeat of Judah. But this is only one of the circumstances which made the victory of Asa so remarkable. Although the battle-field (a

⁵⁹ Evidently all the males capable of bearing weapons were trained to arms. The proportion of Benjamin relatively to Judah, though great, is not excessive (comp. Genesis 49:27).

valley) must have been unfavorable for handling so unwieldy a mass of soldiers and for deploying their war-chariots, yet the host of Egypt was nearly double that of Asa, and must have included well-disciplined and long-trained battalions. But, on the other hand, never before had a battle been fought in the same manner; never had there been more distinct negation of things seen and affirmation of things unseen - which constitutes the essence of faith - nor yet more trustful application of it than in Asa's prayer before the battle, "Is it not with Thee to help between the much (the mighty) relatively to no strength (in regard to the weak)?"

Help us, Jehovah our God, for upon Thee do we put our trust; and in Thy name have we come (do we come) upon this multitude. O Jehovah, Thou art our God (the God of power, Elohim): let not man retain strength by the side of Thee (have power before Thee)!" Such an appeal could not be in vain. In the significant language of Holy Scripture, it was "Jehovah" Who "smote" the Ethiopians, and "Asa and the people that were with him" only "pursued them." Far away to Gerar, three hours southeast from the border city, Gaza, continued the chase amidst unnumbered slain, and still the destroying sword of Jehovah was before His host (2 Chronicles 14:13), and His fear fell upon all the cities round about. To wrest the hostile cities of the Philistines and to carry away much spoil was only one sequence.

Henceforth Egypt ceased to be a source of terror or of danger, and full 330 years passed before its army was again arrayed against Judah. The occasion was too favorable not to have been improved.

Asa had entered on a course of right-doing, and the LORD, upon Whom he and his people had

⁶⁰ The words are not easy of exact rendering, though their meaning is plain. Different translations have been proposed. We have ventured to put it interrogatively. If this view be not adopted, that which would most commend itself to us would be: "It is nothing with Thee, Jehovah, to help between the mighty in regard to the weak."

⁶¹ In 2 Chronicles 14:13 the Hebrew expression is: "they were broken before Jehovah" - as it were by the weight of His Hand.

⁶² In the reign of Josiah (2 Chronicles 35:20-24).

called, had proved a faithful and prayer-hearing God. If the religious reformation so happily begun, and the religious revival which had appeared, only issued in a thorough return to the LORD, the evil which had been in the far and near past and which threatened in the future, might yet be averted. The morrow of the great God-given victory seemed the most suitable time for urging this upon Judah. Accordingly, Azariah, the son of Oded,⁶³ was Divinely commissioned to meet the returning victorious army of Asa, and to urge such considerations upon the people.

"The Spirit of Elohim" was upon him, and what he spake bore reference not only to the past and the present, but also to the future. Hence his message is rightly described as both "words" and "a prophecy" (2 Chronicles 15:8). Carefully examined, it contains alike an address and a prophecy. For it were a mistake to suppose, that the picture which Azariah drew of Israel's sin and its consequence in vers. 3, 5, 6 was only that of the far past in the time of the Judges, of the religious decline under Jeroboam and Abijah, or even of their future apostasy and its punishment. All these were included in what the prophet set before the people.⁶⁴ And not only so, but his words extended beyond Judah, and applied to all Israel, as if the whole people were viewed as still united, and ideally one in their relation to the Lord.⁶⁵ Accordingly, it deserves special notice, that neither in ver. 3 nor in ver. 5 any verb is used, as if to indicate the general application of the "prophecy." But its present bearing, alike as regarded Judah's sin and repentance, and God's judgment and mercy, was an earnest call to carry on and complete the good work which had already been begun (ver. 7).

⁶³ There is no reason for supposing that Oded was Iddo the prophet. In 2 Chronicles 15:8 the words: "Of Oded the prophet," are either defective, or more probably a gloss. This is evident, not only from the ascription of the prophecy to Oded, but from the fact that the grammatical structure requires either the omission of these words or the addition to them of others.

⁶⁴ As regards the past compare Judges 2:10; 3:14; 5:6; 6:2; 12:4; 20. As regards the future compare here, Deuteronomy 4:27-30; 28:20; Isaiah 9:17-20; 55:6; Jeremiah 31:1; Ezekiel 36:24; Amos 3:9; Zechariah 14:13.

⁶⁵ In regard to Israel comp. here Hosea 3:5; 5:13-15.

And king and people hearkened to the voice of God through His prophet. Again and more energetically than before, the religious reformation was taken in hand. The idol "abominations" were removed, not only from Judah and Benjamin, but from the conquered cities of the north, and the great altar of burnt-offering in the Temple was repaired. The earnestness of this movement attracted the pious laity from the neighboring tribes, and even led those of Simeon (in the far south) who, apparently, had hitherto sympathized with the northern kingdom, as they shared their idolatry (comp. Amos 4:4; 5:5; 8:14), to join the ranks of Judah. At a great sacrificial feast, which the king held in Jerusalem, the solemn covenant into which Israel had originally entered with Jehovah (Exodus 24:3-8) was renewed, in repentant acknowledgment that it had been broken, and in believing choice of Jehovah as henceforth their God - just as it was afterwards renewed on two analogous occasions: in the time of Josiah (2 Kings 23:3; 2 Chronicles 34:31), and in that of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 10:28-39). The movement was the outcome of heart-conviction and earnest purpose, and consisted, on the one hand, in an undertaking that any introduction of idolatry should be punished by death⁶⁶ (according to Deuteronomy 13:9), and, on the other, in an act of solemn national consecration to Jehovah.

To Asa, at least, all this was a reality, although, as regarded his subjects, the religious revival does not seem to have been equally deep or permanent (2 Chronicles 15:17). But the king kept his part of the solemn engagement. However difficult it might be, he removed "the Queen-mother" from her exalted position, and thus showed an example of sincerity and earnestness in his own household. And, in token of his consecration to Jehovah, he brought into His House alike those war-spoils which his father had, after the victory over Jeroboam, set apart as the portion for God, and what he himself now consecrated from the spoil

⁶⁶ The Authorized Version conveys the impression, that in every case want of personal piety would be punished by death. Such, however, is not the meaning of the original. It only implies, that the introduction of idolatry by any person should be punishable by death (comp. Deuteronomy 17:2-7).

taken in the war with Egypt. These measures were followed by a period of happy rest for the land - even to the twenty-fifth ⁶⁷ year of King Asa's reign.

V_13 - ASA, KING OF JUDAH — HADAB, BAASHA, ELAH, ZIMRI, TIBNI, AND OMRI, KINGS OF ISRAEL Reign of Nadab — his murder by Baasha — war between Judah and Israel — Baasha's alliance with Syria — Asa gains over Ben-Hadad — prophetic message to Asa — resentment of the king — Asa's religious decline — death of Asa, death of Baasha, reign of Elah — his murder by Zimri — Omri dethrones Zimri — war between Omri and Tibni — rebuilding of Samaria.

1 Kings 15:16 to 16:28; 2 Chronicles 16

While these things were going on in Judah, the judgment, which the LORD had, through Ahijah, pronounced upon Jeroboam and his house, was rapidly preparing. After an apparently uneventful reign of only two years, Nadab, the son and successor of Jeroboam, was murdered while engaged in the siege of Gibbethon (the Gabatha and Gabothane of Josephus). This border-city, on the edge of the plain of Esdraelon (not many miles southwest of Nazareth, and originally in the possession of Dan, Joshua 19:44), must have been of great importance as a defense against incursions from the west - to judge from the circumstance that not only Nadab but his successors sought, although in vain, to wrest it from the Philistines (comp. 1 Kings 16:15). No other event in the reign of Nadab is recorded.

"He walked in the way of his father, and in his sin," and sudden destruction overtook him. Baasha - probably the leader of a military revolution - murdered him, and usurped his throne. The first

measure of the new king was, in true Oriental fashion, to kill the whole family of his predecessor. Although the judgment of God upon Jeroboam and his house, as announced by the prophet, was thus fulfilled, it must not for a moment be thought that the foul deed of Baasha was thereby lessened in guilt. On the contrary, Holy Scripture expressly marks this crime as one of the grounds of Baasha's later judgments (1 Kings 16:7). It is perhaps not easy, and yet it is of supreme importance for the understanding of the Old Testament, to distinguish in these events the action of man from the overruling direction of God. Thus when, after his accession, the prophet Jehu, the son of Hanani, ⁶⁸ was commissioned to denounce the sin, and to announce the judgment of Baasha, these two points were clearly put forward in his message. The sin of Baasha in the murder of Jeroboam's house, and the fact that his exaltation was due to the LORD (1 Kings 16:7; comp. ver. 2). ⁶⁹

Baasha had sprung from a tribe wholly undistinguished by warlike achievements, ⁷⁰ and from a family apparently ignoble and unknown (1 Kings 16:2). His only claim to the crown lay in his military prowess, which the neighboring kingdom of Judah was soon to experience.

Under his reign the state of chronic warfare between the two countries once more changed into one of active hostility. From the concordant accounts in the Books of Kings and Chronicles (1 Kings 15:16-22; 2 Chronicles 16:1-6), we gather what was Baasha's object in this war, and what his preparations for it had been. It seems, that Asa's father, Ahijah, had formed an alliance with the rising power of Syria under Tabrimon ("good is Rimmon"), with the view of holding Israel in check by placing it between two enemies - Syria in the north and Judah in the south.

⁶⁷ As the dates in 2 Chronicles 15:19; 16:1 are incompatible with that of Baasha's death (1 Kings 16:8), and consequently, of course, with that of Baasha's war against Asa, commentators have tried to obviate the difficulty, either by supposing that the numeral 35 refers, not to the date of Asa's accession, but to that of the separation of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, or else by emending the numeral in the Book of Chronicles. The latter is, evidently, the only satisfactory solution. There is manifestly here a copyist's mistake, and the numeral which we would substitute for 35 is not 15 (as by most German commentators) but 25 - and this for reasons too long to explain (hk instead of hl)

⁶⁸ As to Jehu comp. 2 Chronicles 19:2, 3; his death 20:34. As to Hanani, comp. 2 Chronicles 16:7-10.

⁶⁹ In fact the last clause in 1 Kings 16:7 seems added to explain the statement in ver. 2.

⁷⁰ The tribe of Issachar; comp. Genesis 49:14, 15. That tribe furnished the Judge Tola (Judges 10:1).

This "league" was, as we infer, discontinued by Asa during the earlier part of his reign, when his confidence was more entirely placed in Jehovah his God. In these circumstances Baasha eagerly sought and entered upon an alliance with Syria. His primary object was to arrest the migration of Israelites into the kingdom of Judah, and the growing influence of Asa upon his own subjects, consequent, as we know, upon his great religious reformation (1 Kings 15:17). His secondary object was so to overawe Jerusalem, as virtually to paralyze the power of Judah. The invasion was at first successful, and Baasha penetrated as far as Ramah, about midway between Bethel and Jerusalem, thus obtaining command of the two roads which led from the north and the east to the Jewish capital. This, of course, implied not only the re-conquest of the towns which Abijah had taken from Israel (2 Chronicles 13:19; comp. also 15:8), but the complete isolation and domination of Jerusalem. Ramah was to be immediately converted into a strong fortress.

In these straits Asa seems to have forgotten the manner in which his former brilliant victory over Zerah had been obtained. Instead of relying wholly on Jehovah his God, he appears to have imagined that his former policy in regard to Syria had been a mistake. Like many who, on losing the first fresh⁷¹ness of their faith, seek to combine trust in the LORD with what they regard as most likely means of worldly success, Asa entered into a new alliance⁷² with Ben-Hadad, purchasing it with the silver and gold treasured up in the Temple and in the royal palace.

He may have argued, that this did not imply a renunciation of his former allegiance to Jehovah; that he had no personal intercourse with Syria,

which, indeed, was far separated from his dominions; that his was only a countermove to Baasha's schemes; and that a similar league had, during the reign of his father, proved eminently successful. But the result of an alliance so incongruous, and purchased in so dubious a manner, proved the beginning of spiritual declension and of little honor or real benefit to his country. Ben-Hadad was only too ready to entertain Asa's proposals. It could never have been his real policy to strengthen the neighbor-state of Israel, and to weaken that of Judah. On receiving the rich bribe, which made Judah virtually tributary to him, he broke his league with Baasha, and immediately invaded Israel, overrunning the northern territory, penetrating as far as the district of Chinneroth (Joshua 11:2; 12:3; 19:35), - which gave its name to the Lake of Gennesaret, - and occupying the land of Naphtali. This threatening danger in the north of his dominions obliged Baasha hastily to quit Ramah. Asa now summoned all Judah. The materials accumulated for the fortress of Ramah were removed, and used for building two new forts, Geba ("the height") and Mizpah ("the outlook") (comp. Joshua 18:24, 26; also Jeremiah 41:5-9). Both these cities lay within the territory of Benjamin, about three miles to the north of Ramah, in very strong positions, and commanded the two roads to Jerusalem.

But with the retreat of Baasha from Ramah, the troubles of Asa did not end; rather did they only then begin. When, alone and unaided, he had, in the might of Jehovah, encountered the hosts of Egypt, signal success had been his; peace and prosperity had followed; and God's prophet had been specially sent to meet the returning army with good and encouraging tidings. It was all otherwise now. Hanani the prophet was directed to meet Asa with a message of reproof and judgment; instead of, as formerly, peace, there would henceforth be continual warfare (2 Chronicles 16:9); and the alliance with Syria would prove neither to honor nor profit. On the other hand, even had his fears been realized, and the combined armies of Israel and Syria invaded Judah, yet if, instead of buying the alliance of Ben-Hadad, he had gone forward in the name of the LORD, victory such as that over the Ethiopians would again have been his (2 Chronicles 16:7). As it was,

⁷¹ The god Rimmon - or more probably Hadad-Rimmon, the Sun-god of the Syrians, 2 Kings 5:18. Hadad, "the sun," seems from ancient history to have been a royal title both in Syria and Edom. As stated in a previous note, there seem to have been four kings of Syria who bore that name: Hadad-ezer, in time of David; Hezion (Hadad II.) in that of Rehoboam; Tab-Rimmon (Hadad III.) in the time of Abijah; and Ben-Hadad (Hadad IV.) in the time of Asa. It is doubtful, whether the Rezon in the time of Solomon (1 Kings 11:23-55) was identical with Hezion, or whether the former was a usurper.

⁷² The meaning of 1 Kings 15:19 is: Let there be a league.

Asa had chosen a worldly policy, and by its issue he must abide. Henceforth it was no more Jehovah Who was arrayed against the might of man, but the contest would be simply one of cunning and strength, as between man and man (2 Chronicles 16:9).

Hanani had spoken, as all the prophets of Jehovah, fearlessly, faithfully, and only too truly. It was probably conviction of this which, in the unhumbled state of the king, kindled his anger against "the seer." Once more it might seem to Asa as not implying rebellion against God, only a necessary precaution against disunion and dissatisfaction among his own subjects, threatening to upset his political calculations and combinations, to use measures of severity against the prophet from which he would have shrunk at a former period of his reign. All the more requisite might these appear, since his unwelcome monitor evidently commanded the sympathies of an influential part of the community. But it was an unheard-of proceeding, which happily found imitation only in the worst times of Israel (1 Kings 22:6-29; Jeremiah 20:2; 29:26; Acts 16:24), to put the prophet of the Lord "in the house of stocks" ⁷³ on account of his faithfulness, and by a series of persecutions to oppress, and, if possible, crush ⁷⁴ those who sympathized with him.

Nor was this all. The fatal tendency which had showed itself in the Syrian alliance, and still more in the measures against Hanani and his sympathizers, continued and increased with the lapse of years. Two years before his death, Asa was attacked by some disease ⁷⁵ in his feet. In this "also" "he sought not Jehovah but in (by) the physicians." ⁷⁶

⁷³ Two terms are used in Hebrew for "the stocks." That here employed combined the pillory for the body with the stocks for the legs. It was, in fact, an instrument of torture, the neck and arms being confined, and the body in a bent position.

⁷⁴ The verb really means "to crush." It is generally used in connection with cruel oppression, as in Deuteronomy 28:33; 1 Samuel 12:3, etc.

⁷⁵ According to the Talmud (Sotah 10 a) it was the gout.

⁷⁶ It deserves to be noticed that, when the true seeking of Jehovah is referred to, the original uses simply the accusative, as if to indicate the directness of the address; while in all

It is not necessary to explain the blame which Holy Scripture evidently attaches to this, on the ground that these physicians were so called "medicine-men" (as among the heathen), nor to suppose that they used idolatrous or even superstitious means. The example of Hezekiah (2 Kings 20; 2 Chronicles 32:24) sufficiently shows, how one who fully trusted in the LORD would have felt and acted in these circumstances. On the other hand, Asa displayed in this instance the same want of practical religion as in his alliance with Syria - a state of mind which Bengel rightly characterizes as theoretical orthodoxy combined with practical atheism. And as formerly the prophet had summed up what Asa had no doubt regarded as the height of political wisdom in the curt, if somewhat harsh, criticism: "Thou hast acted stupidly over this" (2 Chronicles 16:9) - so might it have been said of him in this matter also. He had not sought Jehovah, but had sought in the physicians - and by the help which he had sought he must abide. He had not trusted in the supernatural, but applied to the natural and in the natural course of events his disease ended in death. It was not wrong to employ means, indeed such were used in the miraculous cure of Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:7), just as in the miraculous rescue of St. Paul's companions from shipwreck (Acts 27:23, 24, 43, 44). And, if one lesson more than another has been impressed on our minds in the course of this history, it is that of the use of natural means, in the ordinary and rational succession of events, for the accomplishment of supernatural and Divinely-announced purposes. But the error and sin of Asa consisted in seeking an object, however lawful and even desirable, in, by, and through secondary means, without first seeking Jehovah. Such conduct carried with it its natural result. For, what a man soweth, that - the very kind of grain - shall he also reap; just as, none the less, that we work for it (or perhaps have it supplied to our hands), but on the contrary, all the more because of it, we first pray, "Give us this day our daily

spurious inquiries or requests the preposition in or by is employed, as if, while marking the means by which the object is sought, at the same time to indicate that any result still comes only from God. For, the Hebrew may be designated as the only theologically true language.

bread," and then receive as directly from His hand the consecrated fruit of our labor.

There was the same sad consistency about Asa's death as in his life. He seems to have built him a special mausoleum in the city of David; and there they laid him in almost Egyptian pomp on a bed of spices, and burnt at his burying, whether for the first time in royal funerals, or according to a more ancient practice,⁷⁷ a large quantity of costly spices and perfumes.

But in following the narrative of Holy Scripture, we have been really anticipating the course of this history. For, as previously stated, Asa not only outlived Baasha, but altogether saw eight kings on the throne of Israel. Baasha seems to have survived his defeat little more than a year. He was succeeded by his son Elah, in the twenty-sixth year of King Asa's reign. The rule of Elah lasted only two years, or, more exactly, part of two years. Baasha had set the example of military revolutions, in which the favorite of the soldiery ascended the throne by the murder of his predecessor, and the extirpation of all who might have rival claims to the crown. The precedent was a dangerous one; and henceforth the throne of Israel was occupied by a series of military adventurers, whose line did not extend beyond their immediate successors. The son of Baasha was a cowardly debauchee, who, forgetful even of the decorum of Eastern princes, indulged in orgies in the houses of his favorites, while his army was fighting before Gibbethon. He fell a victim to a court conspiracy. We know only two of the actors in it: Arza, the steward of the king's palace (or rather, his major-domo), in whose house Elah was drinking himself drunk, and the king's murderer and successor Zimri, who filled the post of chief over half his "chariots," or perhaps his cavalry. The reign of Zimri lasted only seven days, but they were stained by even more than the bloodshed usual on such occasions. For Zimri destroyed not only the family of his predecessor,

⁷⁷ The former seems to me the most probable. It need scarcely be said that the heathen practice of cremation was unknown. On this subject, and on the burning of spices at such funerals, comp. Geier, *De Ebraeorum Luctu*, pp. 104-119. According to Rabbinical writings, Asa was one of the model-kings.

but killed all the "blood-avengers" (relatives, kinsfolk), and even "the friends" of the late king.

Whether, as Josephus explains (*Ant.* 8. 12, 4), Zimri had chosen for his rebellion the moment when all the leading officers were in camp, or Omri himself was originally in the conspiracy, certain it is that the army was not disposed to acknowledge the new usurper. It immediately proclaimed their general Omri, and under his leadership marched back upon Tirzah. Zimri held out until the city was taken, when he retired into "the citadel of the king's palace," which he set on fire, perishing in its flames. But Omri had not at first undisputed possession of the throne.

For four years the people were divided between him and another pretender to the crown, Tibni, the son of Genath. At length Omri prevailed, and "Tibni died" - either in battle or, as Josephus seems to imply, (*Ant.* 8. 12, 5), by command of his rival.

Omri occupied the throne altogether twelve (or part of twelve) years. The first four of these passed in contests with Tibni. During the next two years he resided in Tirzah. After that he bought from Shemer for two talents of silver (about £780) the hill of Samaria. On this commanding position he built the new capital of Israel, which, according to the sacred text, he named Shomeron,⁷⁸ after the former owner of the site.

But on other grounds it deserved to be called "watch-mountain," as the name may be rendered. Situated about the center of the land, six miles northwest of Shechem, it occupied a commanding hill, rising from a broad valley, and surrounded on all sides by mountains, through which there was only a narrow entrance from the west. The approach to the plateau on which Samaria stood is steep on all sides. Thus the site of the new capital, which was also distinguished by great beauty, was singularly adapted both for observation and defense. The country around was very rich, and

⁷⁸ It is remarkable that in the older Assyrian monuments the city is still denominated as that of Omri, its later name appearing only in the time of Tiglath-pileser, nearly two hundred years after its building by Omri. This is a noteworthy confirmation of the Scriptural narrative. According to tradition, John the Baptist was buried in Samaria.

the place well supplied with water. A more suitable spot could not have been chosen by monarch or general. This accounts for the continued importance of Samaria through all the varying fortunes of the country and its people.

The modern miserable village of Sebustiyeh (the ancient Sebaste), inhabited by less than one thousand people, which occupies the site of the once splendid city, where Omri, Ahab, and their successors held high court, contains but few remains of its ancient grandeur. But these are sufficiently remarkable.

The ancient Acropolis, or temple, palace, and citadel, seems to have stood on the western brow of the hill, and its site is still marked by the ruins of a most magnificent colonnade composed of graceful monoliths. The approach to the castle must have been by ascending terraces, which, no doubt, were covered with houses and palaces. Of these not a trace is left. Only on the topmost height - from which, westwards, the Mediterranean, and eastwards, across swelling mountains, a landscape of unrivaled beauty and fertility were full in view - a few broken and upturned pillars mark the site of the royal castle. The dynasties that reigned there have long been swept away; the people over whom they ruled carried into a captivity over which the veil of impenetrable mystery lies. Only the word of the LORD has stood firm and immovable. Of Nadab, of Baasha, of Elah, of Zimri, and of Omri, Scripture has only one and the same thing to say, that they walked in the way and in the sin of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, "wherewith he made Israel to sin, to provoke Jehovah, the God of Israel, to anger." And over each and all did the same judgment sweep. And yet there were more grievous sins to follow, and more terrible judgments to come."

V_14 - ASA AND JEHOSEPHAT, KINGS OF JUDAH - AHAB, KING OF ISRAEL Accession of Ahab — further religious decline in Israel — political relations between Israel and Judah — accession of Jehoshaphat — Ahab's marriage with Jezebel — the worship of Baal and Astarte established in Israel — character of Ahab — religious reforms in Judah — Jehoshaphat joins affinity with Ahab — marriage of Jehoram with Athaliah, and its consequences.

1 Kings 16:29-33, 22:41-44; 2 Chronicles 17: 18:1, 2

OMRI was succeeded on the throne of Israel by his son Ahab, in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of Asa, king of Judah. With the accession of Ahab a new period may be said to commence in the history of Israel, and this alike religiously and politically. In regard to the former, Omri had already prepared the way for further terrible progression in Israel's apostasy. In the language of Holy Scripture (1 Kings 16:25), he "did worse than all that were before him." Whatever the special "statutes" or ordinances in this respect which he introduced, they marked an era in the history of Israel's religious decline (Micah 6:16). But Ahab far out-distanced even his father's wickedness, first by entering into a matrimonial alliance with the vile dynasty of Ethbaal, and then by formally making the worship of Baal the established religion of Israel, with all of vileness and of persecution which this implied. In these circumstances, surely, we may look for extraordinary interposition on the part of Jehovah. For, with such a king and queen, and with a people, not only deprived of the Temple-services and the Levitical priesthood, but among whom the infamous rites of Baal and Astarte had become the established worship, ordinary means would manifestly have been in vain. Again and again had messengers sent from God spoken His Word and announced His judgments, without producing even a passing effect. It needed more than this, if the worship of Baal was to be effectually checked. Accordingly, this period of Israel's history is also marked by a great extension of the Prophetic order and mission. It was theirs to keep alive the knowledge of Jehovah in the land; theirs also to meet the gross and daring idolatry of king and

people by a display of power which could neither be resisted nor gainsaid. Hence the unparalleled frequency of miracles, mostly intended to prove the vainness of idols as against the power of the Living God, the reality of the prophets' mission, and of the authority which the LORD had delegated to His messengers. Only thus could any effect be produced. It was an extraordinary period - and God raised up in it an extraordinary agency. We have already indicated that, in general, considering the notions and expectations of the times, miracles might almost be said to have been God's ordinary mode of teaching the men of that age. This holds specially true of the period now under consideration. Hence the unusual accumulation of the miraculous - and that chiefly in its aspect of power - as displayed by an Elijah and an Elisha, so far from seeming strange or unaccountable, appears eminently called for.

Politically speaking also, this was a period of great change. For, whereas hitherto the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah had been in a state of constant warfare, an alliance between them was now formed. At first, indeed, it seemed otherwise. As Ahab ascended the throne of Israel during the lifetime of Asa, the relations between the two kingdoms continued as before. And when, in the fourth year of King Ahab's reign, Jehoshaphat succeeded his father Asa (1 Kings 22:41), it appeared as if the prospect of an alliance between the sister-countries were more remote than ever. Jehoshaphat began his reign by strengthening the defenses of his country against Israel (2 Chronicles 17:1, 2). His religious measures were in the opposite direction from those of Ahab. Himself earnestly and decidedly pious, it is expressly stated that he walked "not after the doings of Israel." On the other hand, Ahab entered, probably at the beginning of his reign, into an alliance with the most wicked dynasty then in power, by marrying Jezebel,⁷⁹ the daughter of Ethbaal (or Ithobalus, "Baal is with him").

Josephus has preserved to us the history of this royal family (Against Ap. 1. 18). It appears that

Ethbaal was originally the High-priest of the great temple of Astarte in Tyre; that he murdered his king, and usurped the throne, which he occupied for thirty-two years; and that his dynasty continued for at least sixty-two years after his death. These notices will sufficiently explain the upbringing of Jezebel. A clever, strong, bold, and unscrupulous woman, she was by conviction a devotee to the most base and revolting idolatry which the world has ever known, combining with this the reckless contempt of the rights and consciences of others, and the utter indifference as to the means employed, which characterize the worst aspect of Eastern despotism. That she would hate the religion of Jehovah, and seek utterly to destroy - and, indeed, whatever would not bend to her imperious will; that she would prove the implacable foe of all that was pious or even free in Israel; and that she would not shrink from the wholesale murder of those who resisted or opposed her, follows almost as a matter of course. Yet, strange as it may sound, there is something grand about this strong, determined, bold woman, which appears all the more strikingly from its contrast with her husband. Jezebel was every inch a Queen - though of the type of the Phoenician Priest-King who had usurped the throne by murder.

The immediate consequence of this ill-fated union was, that the religion of Jezebel became the worship of the land of Israel. Ahab built in Samaria a temple to "the Baal"⁸⁰ - the Sun-god (the producing principle in Nature) in which he erected not only an altar, but, as we gather from 2 Kings 3:2; 10:27, also one of those pillars which were distinctive of its vile services. As usual, where these rites were fully carried out, he also "made the Asherah"⁸¹ - Astarte, the Moon-

⁷⁹ The classical student will be interested to know that Jezebel was the grand-aunt of Dido, the founder of Carthage. The notices in Josephus are taken from Menander

⁸⁰ With the article, the supreme Phoenician and Assyrian deity, worshipped under different designations throughout that part of Asia. The critical study of the mythology of these countries has yielded many interesting results, and shown, with striking similarities in designation of the deity, the most absolute contrast to the religion of Jehovah as regards doctrine and life, so as to bring the heavenly origin of the latter into marked prominence.

⁸¹ Not as in the Authorized Version (1 Kings 16:33): "And Ahab made a grove."

goddess (the receptive principle in Nature) so that the Phoenician worship was now established in its entirety.

As we infer from later notices, there was a "vestry" attached to these temples, where special festive garments, worn on great occasions, were kept (2 Kings 10:22). Ahab - or perhaps rather Jezebel - appointed not less than 450 priests of Baal and 400 of Asherah, who were supported by the bounty of the queen (1 Kings 18:19; 22:6). The forced introduction of this new worship led to a systematic persecution of the prophets, and even of the openly professed worshippers of Jehovah, which had their complete extermination for its object (1 Kings 18:13; 19:10; 2 Kings 9:7). These measures were wholly due to the absolute power which Jezebel exercised over her husband. Left to himself, Ahab might have yielded to better influences (comp. 1 Kings 18:39-46; 20:13, etc.; 21:27-29). Altogether Ahab presents a strange, though by no means uncommon mixture of the good and the evil, the noble and the mean, issuing finally not in decision for God and what was right and true, but in the triumph of evil, to his own destruction and that of his race. For he possessed qualities which, if directed by the fear of God, might have made him even a great king. He was at times brave, even chivalrous (comp. for example 1 Kings 20:11, and even verse 32); royal in his tastes and undertakings (1 Kings 22:39; 2 Chronicles 18:2); and ready, under temporary emotion, to yield to the voice of conscience. But all this was marred by fatal weakness, selfishness, uncontrolled self-indulgence, an utter want of religion, and especially the influence of his wife, so that in the language of Holy Scripture he "sold himself to work wickedness in the sight of Jehovah," incited thereto by his wife Jezebel (1 Kings 21:25).

While these influences were at work in Israel, Jehoshaphat, encouraged by the blessing which rested on his kingdom, once more vigorously resumed the work of religious reformation in Judah (2 Chronicles 17:6-9). Not only did he take away the "high places and groves," but, in the third year of his reign, he sent five of his princes, accompanied by nine of the principal Levites and two priests, throughout the towns of Judah to teach

the people the Law - no doubt the Pentateuch, of which they took with them an Authorized copy.

The actual instruction would unquestionably be committed to the priestly members of this commission (comp. Leviticus 10:11; Deuteronomy 17:8, 9), whilst the presence of the princes would not only secure the authority of the teachers and the efficiency of their work, but also be requisite for civil purposes, since the Law of Moses affected many of the social relations of life, and accordingly required for its enforcement the authority of the magistrates. Once more signal marks of the Divine approbation followed. Some of the Philistine chiefs rendered voluntary homage to Jehoshaphat; the Arab tribes, whom Asa had subdued during his pursuit of Zerah, the Ethiopian, again paid their tribute; new castles for the defense of the country were built, "store-cities" provided, and the various towns provisioned;⁸² while a large army was ready prepared,⁸³ of which the five chiefs resided in Jerusalem, to be under the personal orders of the king.

It was in circumstances of such marked prosperity that Jehoshaphat "joined affinity with Ahab." The sacred text specially notes this (2 Chronicles 18:1), partly to show that Jehoshaphat had not even an excuse for such a step, and partly, as we think, to indicate that this alliance must, in the first place, have been sought by Ahab. The motives which would influence the King of Israel are not difficult to understand. The power of the country had been greatly weakened by Syria during the reign of Omri. Not only had Ben-Hadad possessed himself of a number of cities, both east (Ramoth-Gilead, for example) and west of the Jordan, but the country had become virtually subject to him, since he claimed even in the capital, Samaria, the right

⁸² This seems the real meaning of the Hebrew, and not "much business," as in the Authorized Version of 2 Chronicles 17:13.

⁸³ A very ingenious defense of the accuracy of the numbers of this army has been lately attempted. But to us these numerals seem corrupt, though it is impossible in this place to furnish proof for the assertion. Probably they were illegible or blotted out, and the copyist seems to have supplied the two first from chap. 14:8, while the other three were formed by deducting 100,000 from each of them. The same total is double that of chapter 14:8.

of having "streets," or rather "squares," that is, Syrian quarters of the town, which owned his dominion (comp. 1 Kings 20:34).

And now Ben-Hadad had been succeeded by a son of the same name, equally warlike and ambitious. In these circumstances it was of the utmost importance to Ahab to secure permanent peace on his southern or Judaeian frontier, and, if possible, to engage as an active ally so powerful and wealthy a monarch as Jehoshaphat. On the other hand, it is not so easy to perceive the reasons which influenced the King of Judah. Of course he could not have wished to see the power of Syria paramount so close to his borders. Did he, besides, desire to have the long-standing (seventy years) breach between Judah and Israel healed? Had he a dim hope that, by the marriage of his son with the daughter of Ahab, the two realms might again be joined, and an undivided kingdom once more established in the house of David? Or did he only allow himself to be carried along by events, too weak to resist, and too confident to dread evil? We can only make these suggestions, since the sacred text affords no clue to this political riddle.

It was, as we reckon, about the eighth year of Jehoshaphat's reign, and consequently about the twelfth of that of Ahab, that Jehoram, the son of Jehoshaphat - then a lad of about fifteen or sixteen years - was married to Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel (2 Chronicles 21:6).⁸⁴

⁸⁴ We arrive at this conclusion as follows: When eight or nine years later, that is, in the seventeenth year of Jehoshaphat, the latter paid his memorable visit to Ahab (1 Kings 22:2), Ahaziah, the son of Jehoram, must have been already about eight or nine years old, since he ascended the throne about thirteen years later, after the death of his grandfather and his father, at the age of twenty-two (2 Kings 8:26). But it must be admitted that the chronology of these reigns is involved and somewhat difficult. Indeed, a perfect agreement is impossible. For the dates are given not according to any fixed standard (such as the Creation, or the Birth of Christ), but according to the reigns of the various kings. But, according to Jewish practice, a year of a king's reign is counted from Nisan (April) to Nisan, so that any time before or after Nisan would be counted as an integral year. Thus a prince who ascended the throne in Adar (March) of one year and died in Ijar (May) of the next, although only reigning fourteen months, would be said to have reigned three years. This difference, when applied to the reigns of the various kings, or to a comparison between the dates of the kings of Israel and Judah, constitutes one of the main practical difficulties in establishing a perfect agreement.

Jehoshaphat lived to see some of the bitter fruits of the rash and unholy alliance which he had sanctioned. Eight or nine years later, he went on that visit to Ahab which led to the disastrous war with Syria, in which Ahab himself perished (2 Chronicles 18.). Then followed the joint maritime expedition of Jehoshaphat and the son of Ahab, which ended in loss. But the worst was to come after the death of Jehoshaphat. His son and successor, the husband of Athaliah, introduced in Judah the idolatry of his wife, and brought shame and loss upon his people. The next occupant of the throne, the - son of Athaliah - followed the example of his father, and perished by command of Jehu. Lastly came the terrible tragedy of the wholesale murder of the royal princes by Athaliah, then her reign, and finally her tragic death.

It was not by means such as those which Jehoshaphat employed that good could come to Judah, the breach be healed between the severed tribes, the kingdom of David restored, or even peace and righteousness return to Israel. But already God had been preparing a new instrumentality to accomplish His own purposes. A Voice would be raised loud enough to make itself heard to the ends of the land; a Hand, strong enough not only to resist the power of Ahab and Jezebel, but to break that of Baal in the land. And all this not by worldly might or craftiness, but by the manifestation of the power of Jehovah as the Living God.⁸⁵

V_15 - AHAB, KING OF ISRAEL Rebuilding of Jericho — the mission of Elijah — his

⁸⁵ A few Talmudic notices about Ahab may here find a place. They are chiefly derived from the Tractate Sanhedrin (102 b-103 b). His outward prosperity, and enjoyment of the pleasures of this world in contrast with those of the next, are emphatically dwelt upon. He is characterized as naturally cold and weak - his sinfulness being chiefly ascribed to his wife; hence this proverb: He who walks in the counsel of his wife will fall into Gehenna (Baba Mez. 59). The heaviest sins of Jeroboam had only been like the lightest of Ahab; in fact, he was guilty of all kinds of idolatry, and even inscribed on the gates of Samaria: Ahab denies the God of Israel! Nevertheless he was allowed to reign twenty-two years because he had shown respect to the Law (as in the embassy of Ben-Hadad to him, in his temporary repentance, etc.), the Law being written with twenty-two letters (which constitute the Hebrew alphabet). Ahab was one of those who were supposed to have no part in the world to come. To dream of King Ahab was an evil omen (Ber. 57 b).

character and life — Elijah's first appearance — parallelism with Noah, Moses, and John the baptist — Elijah's message to king Ahab — sojourn by the brook Cherith — Elijah with the widow of Sarepta — the barrel of meal wastes not, nor does the cruse of oil fail — lessons of his sojourn — sickness and death of the widow's son — he is miraculously restored to life

1 Kings 16:34-17

WITH the enthronement of Ahab and Jezebel, the establishment of the worship of Baal as the state-religion, and the attempted extermination of the prophets and followers of the LORD, the apostasy of Israel had reached its high point. As if to mark alike the general disregard in Israel of the threatened judgments of God, and the coming vindication of Jehovah's Kingship, Holy Scripture here inserts a notice of the daring rebuilding of the walls of Jericho, and of the literal fulfillment of Joshua's curse upon its builder ⁸⁶ (1 Kings 16:34; comp. Joshua 6:26).

Indeed, the land was now ripe for the sickle of judgment. Yet as the long-suffering of God had waited in the days of Noah, so in those of Ahab; and as then the preacher of righteousness had raised the voice of warning, while giving evidence of the coming destruction, so was Elijah now commissioned to present to the men of his age in symbolic deed the alternative of serving Jehovah or Baal, with all that the choice implied. The difference between Noah and Elijah was only that of times and circumstances, the one was before, the other after the giving of the Law; the one was sent into an apostate world, the other to an apostatizing covenant-people. But there is also another aspect of the matter. On the one side were arrayed Ahab, Jezebel, Baal, and Israel - on the other stood Jehovah. It was a question of reality and of power, and Elijah was to be, so to speak, the embodiment of the Divine Power, the Minister of the Living and True God. The contest between them could not be decided by words, but by deeds. The Divine would become manifest in its reality and irresistible greatness, and whoever or

whatever came in contact with it would, for good or for evil, experience its Presence.

We might almost say, that in his prophetic capacity Elijah was an impersonal being - the mere medium of the Divine. Throughout his history other prophets also were employed on various occasions, he only to do what none other had ever done or could do. His path was alone, such as none other had trodden nor could tread. He was the impersonation of the Old Testament in one of its aspects, that of grandeur and judgment - the living realization of the topmost height of the mount, which burned with fire, around which lightnings played and thunder rolled, and from out of whose terrible glory spake the Voice of Jehovah, the God of Israel. We have the highest authority for saying that he was the type of John the Baptist. But chiefly in this respect, that he lifted the ax to the root of the tree, yet, ere it fell, called for fruits meet for repentance. He was not the forerunner of the LORD, save in judgment; he was the forerunner of the King, not of the Kingdom; and the destruction of the state and people of Israel, not the salvation of the world, followed upon his announcement. A grander figure never stood out even against the Old Testament sky than that of Elijah. As Israel's apostasy had reached its highest point in the time of Ahab, so the Old Testament antagonism to it in the person and mission of Elijah. The analogy and parallelism between his history and that of Moses, even to minute details, is obvious on comparison of the two; ⁸⁷ and accordingly we find him, significantly, along with Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Yet much as Scripture tells of him, we feel that we have only dim outlines of his prophetic greatness before us. By his side other men, even an Elisha, seem small. As we view him as Jehovah's representative, almost plenipotentiary, we recall his unswerving faithfulness to, and absolutely fearless discharge of his trust. And yet this strong

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⁸⁷ Jewish tradition extols him almost to blasphemy, to show how absolutely God had delegated to Elijah His power - or, as the Rabbis express it: His three keys - those of rain, of children, and of raising to life. With special application of Hosea 12:13 to Moses and Elijah, Jewish tradition traces a very minute and instructive parallelism between the various incidents in the lives of Moses and Elijah (Yalkut vol. 2. p. 32. d).

man had his hours of felt weakness and loneliness, as when he fled before Ahab and Jezebel, and would fain have laid him down to die in the wilderness. As we recall his almost unlimited power, we remember that its spring was in constant prayer. As we think of his unbending sternness, of his sharp irony on Mount Carmel, of his impassioned zeal, and of his unfaltering severity, we also remember that deep in his heart soft and warm feelings glowed, as when he made himself the guest of the poor widow, and by agonizing prayer brought back her son to life. Such as this must have been intended by God, in His mercy, as an outlet and precious relief to his feelings, showing him that all his work and mission were not of sorrow and judgment, but that the joy of Divine comfort was his also. And truly human, full of intense pathos, are those days of wilderness-journey, and those hours on Mount Horeb, when in deepest sadness of soul the strong man, who but yesterday had defiantly met Ahab and achieved on Mount Carmel such triumph as none other, bent and was shaken, like the reed in the storm. A life this full of contrasts - of fierce light and deep shadows - not a happy, joyous, prosperous life; not one even streaked with peace or gladness, but wholly devoted to God, a bush on the wilderness-mount, burning yet not consumed. A life full of the miraculous it is and must be, from the character of his mission - and yet himself one of the greatest wonders in it, and the success of his mission the best attestation of, because the greatest of the miracles of his history. For, alone and unaided, save of God, he did conquer in the contest and he did break the power of Baal in Israel.

His first appearance, alike in the manner and suddenness of it was emblematic of all that was to follow. Of his birth and early circumstances, we know next to nothing. Josephus assumes (Ant. 8. 13, 2) that the Tishbah which gave him his name (1 Kings 17:1) lay on the eastern side of Jordan, in the land of Gilead; and some modern writers have found the name in the village of Tiseth, to the south of Busrah. But this view has been shown (by Keil) to be untenable. Even more fanciful is the suggestion, that the Hebrew expression means that he was "a stranger among the strangers of Gilead" - possibly a Gentile by birth. Most likelihood

attaches to the generally received view, that his birthplace was the Tishbi in Upper Galilee (within the territory of Naphtali), known to us from apocryphal story (Tobit 1, 2, LXX) - and that, for some unascertained reason, he had migrated into Gilead, without, however, becoming one of its citizens. This the sacred text conveys by the expression, "Elijah the Tishbite from among the dwellers (strangers dwelling) in Gilead." Another inference as to his character may be drawn from his name Elijah: My God Jehovah! though it is scarcely necessary to say that he did not assume it himself. ⁸⁸

With the same, or perhaps with even more startling unexpectedness and strangeness than that which characterized the appearance of John the Baptist - and with precisely the same object in it - Elijah suddenly presented himself in Samaria and before Ahab. It was, and intended to be - to adapt the figure of the Son of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus 48:1) like a fire that kindled suddenly, like a torch that blazed up in the still darkness of the night. There was, indeed, sufficient here to rouse the dullest mind. We can imagine the stern figure of the Tishbite, arrayed in an upper garment of black camel's hair ⁸⁹ - which henceforth seems to have become the distinctive garb of the prophets (Zechariah 13:4) - girt about his loins with a leathern girdle.

The dress betokened poverty, renunciation of the world, mourning, almost stern judgment, while the girdle, which, as the badge of office, was always the richest part of the dress, was such as only the poorest of the land wore. It was an unwonted sight, and, as he made his way up through the terraced streets of rich luxurious Samaria, its inhabitants would whisper with awe that this was a new prophet come from the wilds of Gilead, and

⁸⁸ Later Jewish tradition has represented him as of priestly descent, presumably on account of his sacrifice on Mount Carmel. But even so the illegality of a sacrifice outside Jerusalem would require special vindication. Even Jewish legalism, however, admits the plea of exceptional necessity in this instance. Tradition represents Elijah as a disciple of Ahijah, the Shilonite.

⁸⁹ The rendering, 2 Kings 1:8, "a hairy man" is incorrect. The expression means a man arrayed in a hairy garment, as we gather, of black camel's hair.

follow him. What a contrast between those Baal-debauched Samaritans and this man; what a greater contrast still between the effeminate decrepit priests of Baal, in their white linen garments and high-pointed bonnets,⁹⁰ and this stern prophet of Jehovah!

And now he had reached the height where palace and castle stand, and met Ahab himself, perhaps at the magnificent entrance to that splendid colonnade which overlooked such a scene of beauty and fertility. His message to the king was abrupt and curt, as became the circumstances⁹¹ - after all, only a repetition of Jehovah's denunciation of judgment upon an apostate people (Leviticus 26:19, etc.; Deuteronomy, 11:16, etc.; 28:23, etc.; comp. 1 Kings 8:35; Amos 4:7); but with this addition, that the cessation of dew and rain should last these years - whether many or few - "except" by his word.

This latter perhaps was intended to emphasize the impotence of Ahab's prophets and priests as against Jehovah. It was all most startling, the sudden, strange, wild apparition; the bold confronting of king and people there in Samaria; the announcement apparently so incredible in itself, and in such contrast to the scene of wealth and fruitfulness all around; the unexpected pronouncement of the name Jehovah in such a place; the authority which he pleaded and the power which he claimed - in general, even the terms of his message, "Lives Jehovah, the God of Israel, which I stand before His Face! If there be these years dew or rain, except by the mouth (the spoken means) of my word!"

What answer Ahab made, what impression it produced on him or his people, Holy Scripture, in

its Divine self-consciousness and sublime indifference to what may be called "effect," does not condescend even to notice. Nay, here also silence is best - and the prophet himself must withdraw as suddenly as he had come, hide himself from human ken, not be within reach of question or answer, and let God work, alone and unseen. An absolute pause with that thunder-cloud overhead - unremoved and apparently unremovable - in presence of which man and Baal shall be absolutely powerless, such was the fitting sequence to Elijah's announcement.

Elijah's first direction was to the Wady Cherith - probably: east of the Jordan⁹² - one of those many wide water-courses which drain into the river of Palestine. In this wild solitude, like Moses, nay, like our LORD Himself, he was to be alone with God - - to plead for Israel, and to prepare for his further work. So long as water was left in the brook - for there is nothing needlessly miraculous, even in the story of Elijah - and so long as Jehovah had such strange provisioners as "the ravens"⁹³ to act as His messengers - for there is nothing that is merely natural in this history, and the miraculous always appears by the side of the natural - the prophet would not want needed support.

In this also there were lessons of deepest significance to Elijah (compare as to God's strange messengers, Job 37:10; Psalm 78:23; Isaiah 5:6; Amos 9:3). When in the course of time the waters of Cherith failed, owing to the long drought, Elijah

⁹² This appears probable from the Hebrew expression rendered in the Authorized Version "before Jordan" but meaning literally "in face of Jordan."

⁹³ Surely, it is one of the strangest freaks of criticism (Jewish and Christian) to make of these "ravens" either "Arabs," or "merchants," or "Orebites," from a supposed town of Oreb. We can understand the difficulty of the Rabbis, arising from the circumstance that Elijah should be fed by ravens, which were unclean animals. Those of them who take the literal translation comfort themselves with the fact, that the ravens at least brought him levitically clean food, either from one of the 7,000 in Israel who had not bent the knee to Baal, or from the table of Ahab, or from that of Jehoshaphat. But these Rabbinical comments are so far evidential of the truth of this narrative, that we see how differently a later writer would have constructed this history, had he invented a Jewish legend. Hess adduces parallel instances of the support of people by wild beasts; but they are of little interest, since the provision for Elijah was manifestly miraculous.

⁹⁰ his was the official dress of the priests of Baal.

⁹¹ The Talmud (Sanh. 113. a) mars the whole subject by a discussion, at the close of which Elijah's words are introduced. Both he and King Ahab are supposed to have come on a visit of condolence to Hiel, after the death of his children (1 Kings 16:34). Elijah explains that this terrible calamity was the consequence of the neglect of Joshua's warning, to which Ahab objects that it was incredible the disciple's word should become true, if the master's were not. But since the threatening of Moses in regard to idolatry had not been fulfilled, he could not believe in the warning of Joshua. Upon this Elijah bursts into the words mentioned in the text.

was directed to go to Zarephath (Sarepta, Luke 4:26), where God had "commanded" for him even a more strange provisioner than the ravens, a poor, almost famishing widow, and she a Gentile!

Here again everything is significant. Sarepta was not only a heathen city, outside the bounds of Israel, midway between Sidon and Tyre, but actually within the domains of Jezebel's father. The prophet, who was not safe from Jezebel in Israel, would be safe within Jezebel's own country; he for whom Ahab had so earnestly but vainly searched, not only throughout his own land, but in all neighboring countries (1 Kings 18:10), would be securely concealed in the land most hostile to Elijah's mission, and most friendly to Ahab's purposes. But there are even deeper lessons. It is only one of these, that, cast out of his own country and by his own people, God can find a safe refuge for His servant in most unlikely circumstances; and that, when faith seems to fail, where most we might have expected it, God will show that He has His own where least we would look for them. Again, the reference of our LORD to this history (Luke 4:25), shows these three things. That the entertainment of Elijah was a distinguishing honor conferred on the widow of Sarepta; that it proved of real spiritual benefit to her (as will be shown in the course of this history); and that it implied, that God had purposes of grace beyond the narrow bounds of Israel, unbelieving as it was - in the language of St. Paul, that He was not the God of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles (Romans 3:29). May we not go a step farther, and see in this mission of Elijah to, and entertainment by a heathen widow, an anticipation at least of the announcement of that "Kingdom of God" in its world-wide bearing, which formed part of the message of his antitype, John the Baptist?

Once more the support of Elijah, though miraculous, was to be secured in the course of natural and easily intelligible events. Yet withal, as it had been Jehovah Who "commanded" the ravens, so it was He also Who "commanded" the widow of Sarepta, all unconscious as she was of it, to sustain Elijah.

But how should the prophet recognize her? He must go, trusting to God's direction, and, watching such natural indications as would appear, be

guided to whither he was supernaturally sent. Arrived at the gate of Sarepta, he saw a widow, whose poverty was evidenced by her searching for a little brushwood. Was she the woman who would sustain him? There was a preliminary test ready to hand. She must have recognized the stranger by his dress as a prophet of Jehovah. Would she, the heathen, be willing to hold friendly communication with him? So he handed her the drinking-vessel which he had brought, with the request to interrupt her weary work in order to fetch him some water. Even this first test proved that God had, as of old (Genesis 24:12-21), and as afterwards (Luke 19:30-34; 22:9-12), by anticipation provided for His servant. And, assuredly, as ever, "the cup of cold water" given in the name of the LORD was soon to receive rich reward.

But there was yet another and a sharper test by which to ascertain whether she were the widow to whom Elijah was Divinely sent. If she would hold communion with a servant of Jehovah - did she truly believe in Jehovah Himself; and if so, was her faith such that she would venture her last means of support upon her trust in Him and in His word? To put it in another manner, heathen as she was, though thus far prepared, was there, if not activeness, yet receptiveness of faith in her, of sufficient capacity for such spiritual provision as that which was afterwards miraculously supplied for her temporal wants? This would be the last and decisive test. As she was going to fetch the water, without hesitating or murmuring at the interruption of the old, or at the imposition of the new task, Elijah arrested her with a request yet stranger and far harder than the first. She was evidently a poor widow, and we know from profane history ⁹⁴ that the famine, consequent on the want of rain in Israel, had also extended to Tyre. But when Elijah addressed to her what, even in these circumstances, would have seemed the modest request for "a morsel of the bread" in her hand -

⁹⁴ Menander in Josephus' Ant. 8. 13, 2. According to Menander the actual famine in Tyre lasted one whole year. We may here remark, that if any one wishes to be impressed with the sublimeness of the Scriptural account of this event he can do no better than compare it with the wretched rationalistic prose of Josephus' version of it.

that is, in her possession ⁹⁵ - he could not have been aware of the terrible straits to which his future hostess was reduced.

It was not unwillingness to give even to a complete stranger part of her scanty provision, but that she had absolutely none left. Despair breaks down the barriers of reserve - at least to fellow-sufferers, and, as in this case, to fellow-believers. With the adjuration, "Lives Jehovah, thy God," which attested alike her knowledge of Elijah's profession and her own faith, she told how nothing but a handful of meal was left in the small Cad ⁹⁶ that held her provisions, and a little oil in her cruse. She had now come to gather by the highway a few sticks, with which to cook a last meal for herself and her child. After that they must lie down and die.

It is difficult to know which most to wonder at, Elijah's calmness, consistency, and readiness of faith, or the widow's almost incredible simplicity of trustfulness. Elijah was not taken aback; he did not hesitate to go on with the trial of his hostess to the end; least of all, was he afraid of the possible consequences. As in every real trial of our trust, there was first a general promise, and, on the ground of it, a specific demand, followed by an assurance to conquering faith ("the cad of meal shall not come to an end, nor the cruse of oil fail"). But, if it was as he told her, why this demand in its sharply trying severity: first, to use for Elijah part of the very little she had, and to bring it to him, and only after that to go back ⁹⁷ and prepare for herself and her son?

Needless, indeed, the trial would seem, except as a test of her faith; yet not a mere test, since if she stood it and inherited the promise, it would be such confirmation of it, such help and blessing to

⁹⁵ The words "in thine hand" do not refer to the verb "bring," but to "bread," and mean that Elijah spoke as if she had some bread at home. So the LXX render it.

⁹⁶ The Cad was a small - probably the smallest - barrel. The word has passed into the Latin, the Greek, and the Sanscrit. Curiously enough, our English representative of it is the word "Caddy."

⁹⁷ This is clearly implied in the original, and must have been a much greater trial of her faith than if Elijah had at once returned with her, and the miracle begun then and there.

her - alike spiritually and temporally - as to constitute the beginning of a new life. And so it ever is; and therefore does every specific demand upon our faith stand between a general promise and a special assurance, that, resting upon the one, we may climb the other; and thus every specific trial - and every trial is also one of our faith - may become a fresh starting-point in the spiritual life.

And the widow of Sarepta obeyed. It requires no exercise of imagination to realize what her difficulties in so doing must have been. Did Elijah go back with her after she had brought him the cake, almost the last provision for herself and her child, - to watch as, with wonderment and awe, she prepared the first meal from her new store; or did he allow her to return home alone, perhaps wondering as she went whether it would be as the prophet had said, or whether perhaps she would never again see the Israelite stranger? One thing at least is clear, that this heathen woman, whose knowledge of Jehovah could only have been rudimentary and incipient, and who yet, at the word of a stranger, could give up her own and her son's last meal, because a prophet had bidden it, and promised her miraculous supply for the future, must have had the most simple childlike trustfulness in the God of Israel. What a lesson this, and how full of comfort, to Elijah! There was faith not only in Israel, but wherever He had planted its seed. Elijah had spread the wings of the God of Israel's promise (1 Kings 17:14), and this poor heathen had sought shelter under them.

There, almost hourly these many "days," ⁹⁸ the promise proved true, and, day by day, as when Israel gathered the manna in the wilderness, did an unseen Hand provide - and that not only for herself and her son, but for all "her household."

It was a constant miracle; but then we need, and we have a God Who doeth wonders - not one of the idols of the heathen, nor yet a mere abstraction, but the Living and the True God. And we need in our Bible such a history as this, to give us the pledge of personal assurance, when our

⁹⁸ The word "many" in 1 Kings 17:15 is not in the original (as indicated by the italics). The expression marks an indefinite period of time - yet, as it seems to me, with the peculiar Old Testament idea of time, as "day by day."

hearts well-nigh sink within us in the bitter trials of life - something which to all time may serve as evidence that Jehovah reigneth, and that we can venture our all upon it. And yet as great as this miracle of daily providing seems that other of the faith of the widow of Sarepta!

It was soon to be put to even greater trial - and, as before, not only she, but Elijah also, would learn precious lessons by it. "Days" (time) had passed in happy quiet since God had daily spread the table in the widow's home, when her son became ill. The sickness increased, until, in the language of the sacred text, "there was not left in him breath."⁹⁹

There is something in the immediate contact with the Divine, which, from its contrast, brings sin to our remembrance, and in consequence makes us feel as if it were impossible to stand unpunished before Him - until our thoughts of the Divine Holiness, which in this view seems as consuming fire, pass into the higher realization of the infinite love of God, which seeks and saves that which is lost (comp. Luke 5:8; also Isaiah 6:5). It was certainly not the wish that the prophet should be gone from her home, nor yet regret that he had ever come to it, which wrung from the agonized woman, as she carried to him her dead child in her bosom, these wild words, in which despair mingled with the consciousness of sin and the searching after the higher and better: "What have I to do with thee (what to [between] me and thee), man of the Elohim? Come art thou to me to bring to remembrance my sin, and (thus) to cause the death of my son?" The Divine, as represented by Elijah, having no commonality with her; its fierce light bringing out her sin, and her sin bringing down condign punishment - such were the only clearly conscious thoughts of this incipient believer - though with much of the higher and better, as yet unconsciously, in the background.

⁹⁹ Since the same or at least a very similar expression in Daniel 10:17 does not imply actual death, it would be rash to assert that the child was really dead. This is well pointed out by Kimchi. Similarly, Josephus has it that the child only seemed dead (was "as one dead," in New Testament language). The circumstance that his mother still carried him in her bosom seems to imply the same.

Elijah made no other answer than to ask for her son. He took him from her bosom, carried him to the Alijah (upper chamber) where he dwelt, and there laid him on his own bed. In truth, it was not a time for teaching by words, but by deeds. And Elijah himself was deeply moved. These "many days" had been a happy, quiet, resting time to him - perhaps the only quiet happy season in all his life. And as day by day he had been the dispenser of God's goodness to the widow and her household, and had watched the unfolding of her faith, it must have been a time of strengthening and of joy to his heart. As St. Chrysostom has it: Elijah had to learn compassion in the house of the widow of Sarepta, before he was sent to preach to his own people. He learned more than this in that heathen home. Already he had learned that experience of faith, which, as St. Paul tells us, worketh a hope that maketh not ashamed (Romans 5:4, 5). But now it seemed as if it were all otherwise; as if he were only a messenger of judgment; as if his appearance had not only boded misery to his own people Israel, but brought it even upon the poor widow who had given him shelter. But it could not be so - and in the agony of prayer he cast this burden upon his God. Three times - as when the Name of Jehovah is laid in blessing on His people (Numbers 6:24, etc.), and as when the Seraphim raise their voice of praise (Isaiah 6:3), he stretched himself in symbolic action upon the child, calling upon Jehovah as his God, laying the living upon the dead, pouring his life, as it were, into the child, with the agony of believing prayer. But it was Jehovah Who restored the child to life, hearkening to the voice of His servant.

They are truly human traits, full of intense pathos, which follow - though also fraught with deep spiritual lessons. We can almost see Elijah as he takes down the child to his mother in that darkened room, and says to her only these words of deep emotion, not unmingled with loving reproof, "See, thy son liveth!" Words these, which our blessed LORD has said to many a weeping mother when holding her child, whether in life or in death. And thus we can understand the words of the mother of Sarepta, and those of many a mother in like circumstances: "Now - thus - I know that a Man of Elohim thou, and that the Word of

Jehovah in thy mouth is truth." She had learned it when first she received him; she had seen it day by day at her table; she had known it when God had answered her unspoken thought, her unuttered prayer, by showing that mercy and not judgment, love and forgiveness, not punishment and vengeance, were the highest meaning of His dealings.

The Rabbis see in this story an anticipation of the resurrection of the dead. We perceive this and more in it - an emblem also of the resurrection from spiritual death, a manifestation to Elijah and to us all, that "He quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were" (Romans 4:17).
