

The G. Campbell Morgan Archive

www.gcampbellmorgan.com

2 Kings

AS we have already said, the two books of Kings appear in the Hebrew Bible as one, and tell a continuous story. Our second book, therefore, forms a sequel to the first. In the first we have the history of about a century and a half, and in the second of about three centuries.

Once again the two thrones are in view. The first steadfast, immovable, always abounding in activity and in progress; the second trembling, failing, and at last abolished. The early part of the history of this period, contained in the first book of Kings, emphasizes the facts of the failing government of man, and the unfailing government of God. The latter part, contained in the second book, emphasizes the results issuing in each case. The permanent values of the second book, then, are its revelations of the failure of man, and the victory of God.

I confess to the difficulty of an embarrassment of riches in approaching this study. This was the period of the prophets. All the great prophetic messages preserved for us were delivered during this period. That fact creates the difficulty of interpreting the message of this book. Read the book apart from the prophecies, and it is disappointing indeed. Read the book as the background of the prophecies, and then we see in the background man's failure, and in the foreground God's great and overwhelming victory.

Let us notice what this book teaches concerning the failure of man, as to its cause, its manifestations, its hopelessness, and its issue.

The cause of human failure was the lost sense of Jehovah; its manifestation was the lost ideal of nationality; its hopelessness was the lost sensitiveness of conscience; and its issue was the lost vocation.

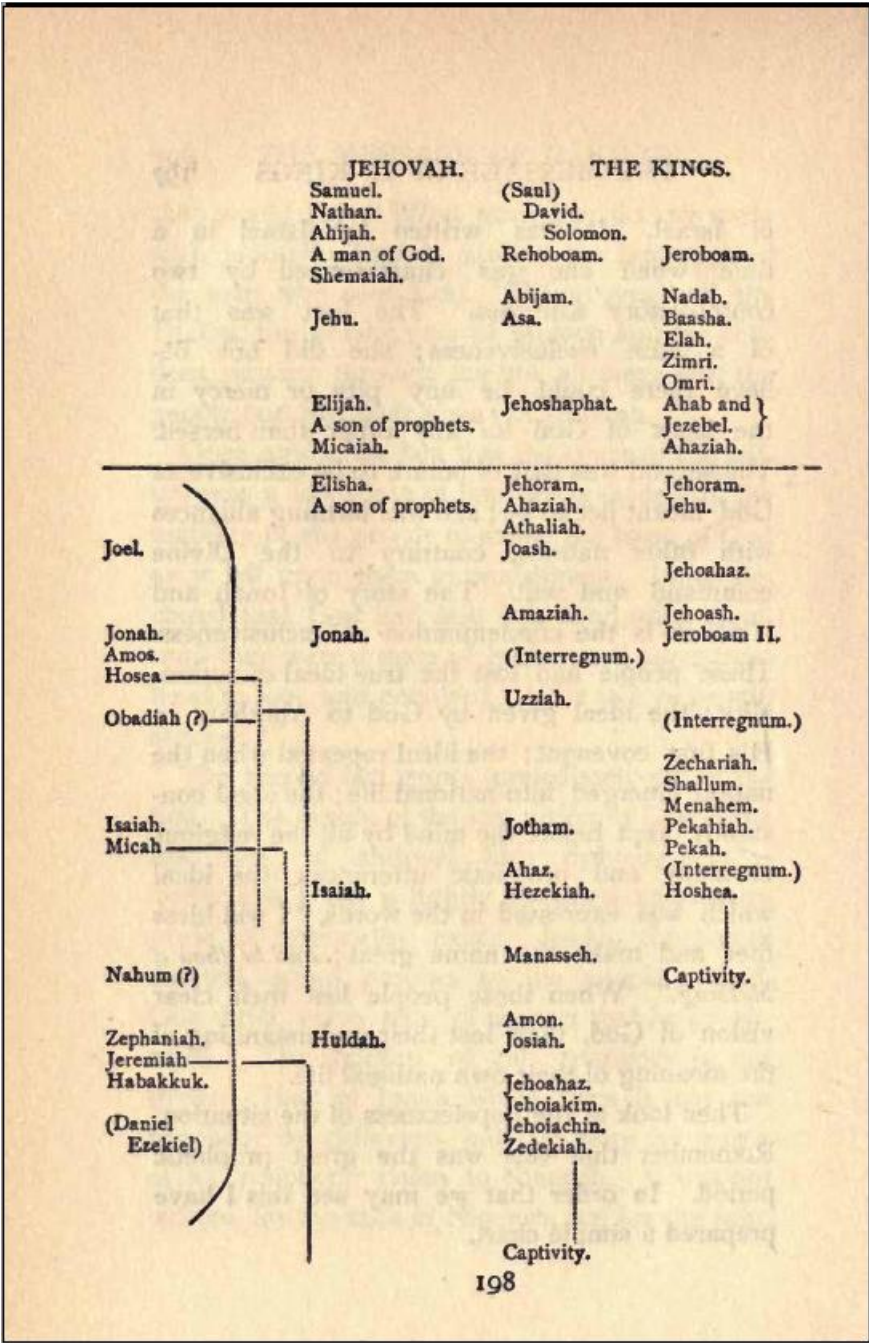
The fact of the people's lost sense of Jehovah is illustrated in their kings. There were exceptions. Joash, Amaziah, Jotham, Hoshea served the Lord; but even of them it is written, "not like David," or that "the high places were not taken away." These did not utterly fail, yet failed partially, either by compromise, or some measure of backsliding. Two names stand out as the names of kings who followed the Lord those of Hezekiah and Josiah; yet even they failed in some degree. Apart from these, the story of the kings is that of men who had no vision of God. They persisted in courses of evil. They turned their back upon the principles of righteousness. They multiplied transgression through the length and breadth of the land. Men occupied the throne on earth, who had lost their vision of the Throne in the heavens.

This lost sense of Jehovah was manifested also in the idolatries and alliances of the people. No man who has a clear vision of God turns to an idol. An idol is always a substitute for something else, an attempt to fill a vacuum. There is a sense in which idolatry is a perpetual proof of man's capacity for God. That is not to excuse idolatry. It is rather to show the heinousness of its sin. At the back of every sin there lies a possibility of good. That does not mean that sin is something to be pitied, petted, pampered. If man prostitutes something that is good, hell is the proper result. Idolatry is a demonstration of the capacity for God; but when a man turns to an idol, it is because he has lost his vision of God. Hosea spoke of Ephraim as "a silly dove," "a cake not turned," but he declared that Ephraim would get back to God, and then would say, "What have I to do any more with idols?" That is always the language of the man who sees God. The groves and the Baalim, the worshippers of Moloch and the children passing through the fire, all mean that the people had lost their vision of Jehovah.

Once again, the fact that the cause of the failure was a lost sense of Jehovah is evident in the inability of the people to detect the hand of God as it fell upon them in punishment. Isaiah declared that God had laid His hand upon them, until they were a mass of bruises and sores from head to foot, and enquired, "Why will ye be still stricken?"

The second fact grows immediately out of the first. The result of the lost vision of God is the lost ideal of national life ; righteousness is undervalued, sin is lightly esteemed, and a false pride of nationality exists. Jonah, the son of Amittai, was a prophet to the people of God. One brief verse tells of the fact that he prophesied. The burden of the prophecy is not given. That of Jonah which lives is not the prophecy he delivered, but the story he wrote of his prophetic vision to Nineveh. It was not written for the sake of Nineveh, but for the sake of Israel. It was written for Israel in a time when she was characterized by two contradictory attitudes. The first was that of a false exclusiveness; she did not believe there could be any pity or mercy in the heart of God for any other than herself. The second was that of failure to be exclusive as God meant her to be; she was forming alliances with other nations, contrary to the Divine command and will. The story of Jonah and Nineveh is the condemnation of exclusiveness. These people had lost the true ideal of nationality; the ideal given by God to Abraham in His first covenant; the ideal repeated when the nation emerged into national life; the ideal constantly kept before the mind by all the religious economy and prophetic utterances; the ideal which was expressed in the words, "I will bless thee and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing." When these people lost their clear vision of God, they lost their understanding of the meaning of their own national life.

Then look at the hopelessness of the situation. Remember that this was the great prophetic period. In order that we may see this I have prepared a simple chart.



The two thrones are suggested and the two processes are seen. On the one side a line of prophets, on the other a succession of kings. On that of the kings Saul, David, Solomon, the division under Rehoboam and Jeroboam, and then through Kings of Israel and Judah to the captivity in each case. That is the throne on the earth.

Now turn to the other side, and see the Throne in the heavens. God dealt with His people through the prophets. In the inner column are the names of the prophets mentioned in the books of Kings. They are Samuel, Nathan, Ahijah, a man of God, Shemaiah, Jehu, Elijah, a son of prophets, Micaiah, Elisha, a son of prophets, Jonah, Isaiah, and the prophetess Huldah.

The outer column begins with the second book of the Kings, and contains the names of men who were speaking during the period, but who are not named in the text: Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Obadiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk; and in exile, Daniel and Ezekiel. The immediate result of the ministry of these men was almost nothing. Isaiah, in that part of his prophecy in which he described the result of his own preaching, enquired and it is the story of all the prophetic ministry " Who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?" Mark the hopelessness of the case, the lost sensitiveness of conscience that could listen to such messages as these, and yet continue in the sin of rebellion and in forgetfulness of God.

Think of another fact. The reformations were all superficial. Immediately Hezekiah had passed away, the people returned to their old ways of evil. Josiah conducted a remarkable reformation, and yet it is a significant fact that Zephaniah never referred to it. The reason is to be found in the story of Huldah the prophetess. When the reformation was proceeding, and the book of the law was discovered, they sent to Huldah, and she, inspired of God to deliver her message, said in effect that there was no real value in the reformation; that the king meant well, and would be rewarded, but that the people were not following God. The condition of the religious life of the period is seen more clearly in Chronicles, the two books that deal with the life of the people from the Temple standpoint. When Hezekiah began his reformation he commenced with the Temple, and before anything else could be done it took the whole company of priests and Levites sixteen days to carry rubbish therefrom, which simply means that the Temple had become a lumber store. In the days when Josiah carried out his reformation, the book of the law was found. Mark the significance of this fact, that it had to be found! Moreover, its teaching so astonished Josiah that he halted in the middle of his work to enquire from the prophetess Huldah. The people had so forgotten the law of their God that, when it was found, they were absolutely unfamiliar with it.

Finally the issue of the failure was that of the loss by the nation of its vocation. I cannot tell the story in detail, but three words sum it up conquered, captive, castaway! Is there a sadder story in all the history of the world than that?

But look at the other side, that of the victory of God. The secret of that victory is discovered by going back to the beginnings. When God promised Abraham that He would bless him and make him a blessing, and that through his seed the whole world should be blessed, "He sware by Himself." We have a light upon that ancient declaration in the letter to the Hebrews, when the writer declared " He could sware by none greater, He sware by Himself . . . that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have a strong encouragement," God entered into a covenant with Abraham. He will fulfill His covenant. He will be true to Himself. He will allow nothing ultimately to thwart the purpose of His love. He remembered His covenant throughout the whole of the process.

Then notice the method of God. "The Lord testified ... by the hand of every prophet, and of every seer." In that method there was included His judgments, the awful visitations which these people never seem to have understood; and His tender mercy, directly the people turned to Him, He turned to them, and was ready to receive them.

The principle of the Divine activity was its perpetual hopefulness. In the prophecy of Hosea this is clearly revealed. In the wonderful love song of Jehovah we touch the hidden spring of everything, "How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?" That is the inspiration of God's victory. It is that determination of love, and that hopefulness of God, which issue in His victory.

Finally observe the issues. The national ideal was preserved in captivity, and is preserved until this hour. There is no study more fascinating than that of the Hebrew people. Scattered over the face of the earth, and neutralized among strange people, their nationality cannot be destroyed. God preserves them wherever they go. They are still His, and His mark is upon them. Even in captivity the national ideal was preserved. He preserved the seed for the fulfillment of His purpose, until at last the promise to Abraham was fulfilled.

The prophetic utterances constitute a literature for the ages. There are senses in which the Hebrew prophets have a more living message to this age than the Christian apostles have. The apostolic writings are for the Church. The prophets speak still to the nations Joel, with his far-flung vision of the Day of the Lord; Jonah, with his condemnation of exclusiveness; Amos, the herdman of Tekoah, who thundered concerning national accountability; Hosea, who interpreted the sin of the God-forgetting people as spiritual adultery; Obadiah, with his curse on cowardice; Isaiah, the prophet of the Theocracy; Micah, dealing with authority, false and true; Nahum, with his vindication of Jehovah's vengeance; Zephaniah, with the message of the severity and goodness of God; Jeremiah, the prophet of failure; Habakkuk, with his problems of faith. These constitute a literature for all time, and it was made in the age when these people so signally failed.

Let me state briefly what seem to me to be the living messages of this book. I do so by two quotations that come right out of the period. This is the first, "Where there is no vision the people cast off restraint" The second is, "He shall not fail nor be discouraged." Let us see the setting of these two quotations. The first one is found in the Proverbs of Solomon, not in the collection of proverbs which he collected himself, but in the second collection which the men of Hezekiah, King of Judah, copied out Mark the suggestiveness of this. Solomon, the man by whom all the seeds of disruption were sown, wrote down as a proverb, "Where there is no vision the people cast off restraint" Go to the beginning of the period in the first book of Samuel, "The word of the Lord was precious in those days" that is, it was rare in those days; "there was no open vision" That is how the period began. There was no vision of God. Come to the end, the last period, the Lamentations of Jeremiah: "Her prophets find no vision from Jehovah." That is the story of it all.

What, then, is the message of the book? If the vision of God be lost, the issue must be degraded ideals, deadened consciences, defeated purposes. That is the national teaching of the book. "Where there is no vision the people cast off restraint," abandon observance of the Sabbath, abandon themselves to their own appetites, until a nation like our own becomes drugged with drink, while it does not know that it is drunk.

Thank God the book has another message. Isaiah, the greatest prophet of the period, declared of Jehovah, "He shall not fail nor be discouraged." The man who said this was the man whose writing commences, "The vision of Isaiah, the son of Amos." This man could make this declaration in the midst of all the decadence of his age, because, to use his own words, "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne." That vision ultimately enabled him to say: "Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed away from my God? Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard? the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth fainteth not, neither is weary." That is power. "There is no searching of His understanding." That is knowledge. "He giveth power to the faint; and to him that hath no might He increaseth strength. Even the youths," who seem as though one never can tire them, "shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; they shall walk, and not faint." Nothing finer than that was ever written, and it was written in that awful period of human failure by the man who saw the throne and Jehovah. That is the living message of the hour. "The Lord . . . fainteth not, neither is weary." "He shall not fail nor be discouraged." If we are to serve our age, we must see God; and seeing Him, we shall ever be inspired by the certainty of the ultimate victory.