A table of contents for *Vox Evangelica* can be found here:

The United Monarchy:
Fact or Fiction?

Arthur E. Cundall

[p.33]

The intention of this study is to outline the biblical evidence for the relationship between Israel and Judah during the period of the 'United Monarchy', with particular reference to Solomon's reign. To understand Solomon's policies involving his own tribe of Judah and the northern tribes of Israel we need to examine the way in which the terms Judah and Israel were used during the period of the early monarchy. The popular view, possibly influenced by the fact of a divided kingdom after the death of Solomon in 922 B.C., is that the kingdom was united before this point. In fact, the degree of unity was extremely superficial, indeed, at times its sole strength appears to lie in the attachment of the halves of the kingdom, individually, to the reigning monarch. This fundamental division between north and south was a basic fact, with its roots in the history of the centuries preceding the monarchy.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

(a) *The Judges' Period*

Various factors combined to isolate Judah, in this period, from the rest of the tribes.[1] The natural divisions of valleys and mountains within Palestine tended toward disunity, and this was accentuated after the settlement of the Israelites, when there was a deterioration in leadership and in the situation generally. Whilst the editor of the book of Judges notes that 'the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord... and he sold them into the hand of...' (Judg. 3:7f. etc.) suggesting that all Israel was involved, a careful examination of each instance shows that usually only one or two tribes were affected. In one case only, in the judge-ship of Deborah and Barak, was a majority of the tribes involved, and even here the tribe of Judah is pointedly excluded—a clear witness to her isolation from the rest of the tribes. Some have viewed Deut. 33:7 as further evidence of the separation. The situation was aggravated by the presence of the unreduced Jebusite city of Jerusalem on Judah's northern frontier. Probably much more serious was the continuing pressure of the Philistines, who, at one time, exercised some form of direct control over at least a portion of Judah (Judg. 15:11). A legacy of isolation extending over a period of centuries was not to be lightly overcome.

(b) *The reign of Saul*

A superficial reading of the Old Testament would suggest that Saul's reign was relatively unimportant, and that little was achieved therein. The first book of Samuel is dominated by Samuel and David, with Saul sandwiched somewhat insignificantly between the two. The Chronicler's attitude is even more devastating. He records only the *death* of Saul (1 Chr. 10), as the introduction to the reign of David.

However, an investigation of the text demonstrates a degree of unity amongst

[p.34]

---

[1] For further detail on this point see A. E. Cundall, *Judges* (1968), 35-7.

the tribes that was rarely, if ever, exceeded in the entire history of Israel subsequent to the settlement. Granted that this was a military necessity, resulting largely from Philistine pressure, it is no less a significant fact. Moreover, the extent of Saul's kingdom was greater than is generally realised: the campaigns noted in 1 Sam. 14:47ff.; 15:1-9 indicate the re-establishment of the frontiers with the nations mentioned; Samuel's visit to Bethlehem (1 Sam. 16:1-13) indicates Saul's control of the area south of Jerusalem, a fact confirmed by the ease with which Saul's troops pursued David throughout the territory of Judah (1 Sam. 23:14, 19-29; 24 etc.). Not until David defected to Gath was lie safe from Saul's reach (1 Sam. 27:1-4). The medium at Endor, north of the Esdraelon valley, accepted Saul's authority over her area (1 Sam. 28), whilst the subsequent importance of Mahanaim as the centre of Ish-bosheth's kingdom (2 Sam. 2:8f.), together with the action of the men of Jabed-gilead (1 Sam. 30:1Iff.) suggest firm control of Trans-jordania. The Philistine menace on Saul's entire western flank continued throughout his reign, and the references to battles and troop movements at the end of his reign (1 Sam. 28:4; 29:1; 30) may indicate Philistine control of the vital Esdraelon valley itself, which possibly Saul was challenging.[2]

Few details have survived of Saul's administrative system, probably there was a pre-occupation with military matters, and the unity was one of necessity. His capital was Gibeah (1 Sam. 10:26; 13:2; 14:2 etc.). The somewhat idealistic list in 2 Sam. 2:9 may indicate five of the divisions within his kingdom.[3] It is perhaps of significance that where figures of troops are given, the numbers for Judah are listed separately (e.g. 1 Sam. 11:8; 15:4).

(c) *The reign of David*

David's kingship over all Israel was established in two distinct stages:

(i) Almost immediately he was accepted as the king of Judah and established his capital at Hebron (2 Sam. 2:1-4). When he had been a mercenary captain operating under Philistine control he used his position to ingratiate himself with the rulers of Judah, both by harrying their southern neighbours (1 Sam. 27:8-12) and by judicious gifts to potential supporters (1 Sam. 30:26-31).[4] It is virtually certain that his rule over Judah was approved by his overlords the Philistines, who had no reason to doubt his loyalty. They would also welcome the division of Saul's large and potentially dangerous kingdom. David seems to have made a tacit appeal to Jabesh-gilead, in Trans-jordania, for its support (2 Sam. 2:5ff.),[5] but to no avail, for Abner was able to establish Ish-bosheth as king in this area (2 Sam. 2:8f.). The movement of the capital of the northern kingdom to the eastern side of Jordan is probably indicative of increasing Philistine pressure, if not actual occupation, west of the Jordan. There was, however, no severance of the communication link between Judah and Ish-bosheth's kingdom (2 Sam. 2:12, 29; 3:12).

(ii) The basic rivalry between Israel and Judah is shown in the 'long war' between them (2 Sam. 3:1, 6). Probably this was due to Abner attempting to regain some kind of control over Judah, as suggested by his initiative in the confrontation which culminated in the 'battle of champions' and the rout of his army (2 Sam. 2:12-28). Relationships would hardly be improved during this period, but with the deaths of first Abner (2 Sam. 3:27) and then Ish-

---

[2] Cf. F. F. Bruce, *Israel and the Nations* (1963), 27.
[3] Cf. Y. Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible* (1967), 255, 256.
[4] Cf. John Bright, *A History of Israel* (1960), 173.
[5] Cf. G. B. Caird, *Interpreter's Bible* Vol. 2 (1954), 1050.

bosheth (2 Sam. 4:7) the Israelites were left with no alternative but to accept David as their king (2 Sam.

[p.35]

5.1-3). It is significant, in the light of events immediately after Solomon's death, that this arrangement was sealed by covenant (cf. 2 Sam. 3:21) which doubtless outlined the mutual obligation of king and people. Also, 'all the elders of Israel' played a significant part. The importance of this group is earlier attested by the negotiations which the powerful Abner entered into with them concerning the possibility of accepting David as king (2 Sam. 3:17). From the outset, therefore, there was a difference in the nature of the monarchy in the two parts of the kingdom. In the northern section, Israel, it was freely entered into by the elders, and safeguarded by covenant. It also emerges as a corollary, that 'Israel' is thought of as distinct from Judah. The separate reference to Benjamin in 2 Sam. 3:19 may result from the personal relationship of this tribe to the ruling king of Israel, Ish-bosheth, and thus have no abiding significance.

The reaction of the Philistines when David became king over Israel as well as Judah was immediate (2 Sam. 5:17-25). They were prepared to accept David's rule over Judah, they could not tolerate his rule over the northern kingdom also for it constituted an alliance which threatened their own supremacy. Their tactics are significant. Twice they struck up through the valley of Rephaim in an attempt to *divide* the kingdom into its former, constituent parts; twice they failed.[6]

A problem immediately confronting David was the choice of a capital. Hebron, the capital of Judah, was too far south, but it would have offended Judah had a northern city, such as Shechem, been selected. David's awareness of the susceptibilities of the two parts of his kingdom and his genius for making the correct political decisions is shown in his making Jerusalem, newly captured by his own mercenary army and therefore, in a sense, his personal gift to the nation, his capital (2 Sam. 5:6-9). Previously occupied by the Jebusites, it had formed a small, neutral enclave between north and south and so was acceptable to both.[7]

But the basic disunity of the kingdom is further apparent even in David's long and successful reign, especially in the events which followed Absalom's rebellion (2 Sam. 15). Both Israel and Judah were implicated in this, but the latter seems to have been the prime mover. The revolt originated in Hebron, the ancient capital; David's counsellor, Ahithophel and his kinsman, Abner, the rebel general (2 Sam. 19:13) were implicated; David was so unsure of support in the environs of Jerusalem that he deemed flight the wisest course, and he found sanctuary at Mahanaim, in Trans-jordania (2 Sam. 17:24-29). After Absalom's death (2 Sam. 18) David made one of his few unwise political moves by approaching the elders of Judah independently, with no apparent overtures being made to the northern tribes (2 Sam. 19:11-15).[8] The resentment of the latter was immediate and deep (2 Sam. 19:41ff.), especially as they claimed to have been the first to suggest the return of David as king (cf. 2 Sam. 19:10). It appears that they looked to Judah for a lead at this time and were bitter at being overlooked subsequently, yet could do nothing effective about it. True, their hostility found expression in the revolt of Sheba (2 Sam. 20), but this does not seem to have had much support and after

---

[6] Cf. Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* (1960), 187-9.
[7] Cf. G. W. Anderson, *The History and Religion of Israel* (1966), 54, 55.
[8] Cf. H. W. Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel* (1960), 364-8.

Sheba's precipitant flight northward, he was disposed of by the citizens of the small town Abel of Beth-maacah, to save their own skins. For our present enquiry two points are important:

(i) David's intended use of the 'men of Judah' to put down the rebellion (2 Sam. 20:4).

[p.36]

(ii) The words of Sheba:

'We have no portion in David, and we have no inheritance in the sons of Jesse; every man to his tents, O Israel!' (2 Sam. 20:1).

The poetical form of these words, and their repetition in I Kgs. 12:16, suggest that this was a popular expression indicating a continuing strata of opposition to the Davidic dynasty. Its background, with the reference to tents in an age when the vast majority of Israelites had long since become house-dwellers, may have an even greater significance. It hints at the period of the amphictyony, when representatives of the tribes foregathered at the central sanctuary to consider matters of common interest, and to make decisions. After the amphictyonic gathering the delegates would return to their tents, i.e. return home. So the call may well indicate the impossibility of reaching a decision, leading to a decisive break in the negotiation. Compare the reverse situation indicated in Jgs. 20:8 where agreement has been reached, and the tribes vow, 'We will not any of us go to his tent....' In this case Israel, the northern tribe, was withdrawing from the relationship formerly entered into with Judah.[9] Or, alternatively and less likely, the phrase may indicate Israel's abandonment of Jerusalem, the centre of the Davidic dynasty, in favour of a return to the amphictyonic tent-festival associated with Shechem.

One final point concerning the reign of David may be noted. In 2 Sam. 24 we find the record of David's census of the people, presumably towards the end of his reign. The commission to Joab is, 'Go number Israel and Judah' (24:1) and, the census completed, Joab supplies separate figures for the two halves of the kingdom (24:9), further underlying the fact that they were regarded as separate entities.

(d) *The reign of Solomon*

It is pertinent to ask, in the light of events after Solomon's death, why there was no difficulty in establishing his rule over Israel as well as Judah, at his accession (cf. 1 Kgs. 1:35). The following reasons are probably sufficient:

(i) David's prestige was immense and his reputation, even in the north, was high. 2 Sam. 8:15 observes that 'David administered *justice and equity* to all his people'. The discontent manifested in the north during the latter part of Solomon's reign has no parallel in the reign of David.

(ii) David had put down the two rebellions of Absalom and Sheba with the use of his mercenary troops and this might well have discouraged any early attempt, on Israel's part, to

---

[9] Cf. the stimulating study by Abraham Malamat, *Organs of Statecraft in the Israelite Monarchy*, The Bible Archaeologist Reader, Vol. III (1970), 168-170.

break away. The mercenary troops, under Benaiah, strongly supported Solomon (2 Sam. 20:23; 1 Kgs. 1:38).

(iii) Solomon was confirmed as king-designate during the life-time of David himself (cf. 1 Kgs. 1:35, which specifically mentions the two divisions of the kingdom). This practice, which became customary in Judah, gave great prestige and standing to the one nominated.

Two factors, however, in Solomon's reign demonstrate a hardening of his attitude to the northern tribes, and suggest that increasingly, they were regarded as 'second-class citizens'.

(i) The first concerns the division of the kingdom into units to provide for the upkeep of the central administration. The details of this are found in 1 Kgs. 4, where verses 7, 22f., 26ff. reveal the extent of the onerous contribution required.

[p.37]

It is likely that this system was introduced in the latter portion of Solomon's reign, since two of the regional officers, Ben-abinadab (verse 11) and Ahima-az (verse 15) were sons-in-law of the king, who was himself very young when he ascended the throne (cf. I Kgs. 3:7). The list also apparently excludes the 'twenty cities in the land of Galilee' ceded to Hiram king of Tyre by Solomon, in part payment for services and supplies after the latter had reigned for twenty years (1 Kgs. 9:10-14).

But the main interest concerns the divisions themselves. Solomon has been accused of attempting to stamp out the old tribal boundaries in the interests of a centralised bureaucracy, on the grounds that the boundaries set are not identical with the old tribal allocations. But nor are those boundaries completely ignored, for Naphtali, Asher, Issachar and Benjamin (verses 15-18) are preserved as separate entities, whilst 'the hill country of Ephraim' (verse 8) and 'the land of Gilead' (verse 19) also probably bear some resemblance to the old tribal divisions. The remainder of the areas (verses 9-14) are defined in relation to their principal town or towns.Solomon's object, in all probability, was to make an equitable distribution of the material responsibility, recognising that not all the tribal areas were equally capable of the support required.

One point emerges, however. The tribe of Judah, mentioned briefly at the end of the list (verse 19b) is not included in this system designed to maintain the administration. Possibly Judah did not escape taxation completely, but the main burden fell upon the northern tribes. Solomon's own tribe was specially favoured in this two-tiered system of taxation, whilst Israel was viewed more as a vassal-kingdom.

(ii) The second is the degree of forced labour required of the men of the Northern Kingdom. Two levels of servitude are indicated. The survivors of 'the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites' constituted a slave labour force, presumably with no privileges or free time. The people of Israel were completely exempted from this category (1 Kgs. 9:20ff.). A second type was more properly a type of forced labour, involving one month's compulsory service and then a two-month break at home (1 Kgs 5:13f.). Israel was included in this group, and there is a strong possibility, if not an actual certainty, that 'Israel' here refers to the northern tribes only, with Judah again excluded. Certainly they showed strong resentment against this system; indeed it became the fundamental issue in their rejection of Solomon's son, Rehoboam (1 Kgs. 12:1-20). Yet it is of interest to note that the

Israelites expected some form of compulsory service. Their request was not for its complete removal, but an appeal for some easement of an intolerable burden (1 Kgs. 12:4).[10] It appears that they had accepted their position as inferior in status to Judah but superior, of course, to other subject peoples.

Was Solomon guilty then of gross favouritism? Did he really adopt the policy of deliberately keeping the northern tribes under some measure of subjection, whilst favouring his own tribe of Judah? Did he really abandon the attempts of his father, David, to create a real unity between north and south? If he did all this, *without any real cause,* then he was indeed unwise, and the responsibility for the Disruption must be laid as much upon his folly as upon Rehoboam's stubborn tactlessness. Can anything be said to justify this policy of Solomon? A careful examination of the evidence may well suggest that it was, in fact, forced upon him by events. Consider the evidence

[p.38]

(i) *The rebellion of Jeroboam* (1 Kgs. 11:26-40). Scant detail of this is given. The outstanding qualities of Jeroboam, his position as superintendent of the forced labour corps of the northern tribes (which would enable him to understand the deep hostility of those involved) and his subsequent flight to Egypt during the reign of Shishak are all noted. Perhaps the most important aspect of this incident is the prophetic intervention of Ahijah in favour of Jeroboam and in condemnation of Solomon. The subsequent action of another prophet, Shemaiah, in preventing Rehoboam from attempting an immediate suppression of Israel after the Disruption (I Kgs. 12:21-24) strengthens the impression that there was strong opposition, on religious as well as political grounds, to the policies of Solomon. This resentment was especially prominent in the north.

(ii) *The policy of Shishak of Egypt.* Solomon had been linked by marriage with the weak, twenty-first Egyptian dynasty (1 Kgs. 3:1). But about 935 B.C., approximately thirteen years before Solomon's death, and therefore in the last third of his reign, Shishak became the founder of the twenty-second dynasty. A vigorous ruler, Shishak adopted a strong foreign policy which necessarily involved his north-eastern neighbour Solomon and the kingdom of Israel/Judah. He was not able to intervene directly until some five years after Solomon's death (1 Kgs. 14:25), but his harbouring of the fugitive rebel, Jeroboam (1 Kgs. 11:40) gives a clear indication of his attitude. It is surely no coincidence, either, that following Solomon's death, Jeroboam returned to Israel at the request of the elders of the assembly. He took a leading part in the negotiation, and was subsequently made the first king of Israel (1 Kgs. 12:2f, 12, 20). One can hardly avoid the impression of a pre-arranged plan between Jeroboam and the elders of Israel, with the connivance of Egypt, and a carefully arranged 'incident' in which Rehoboam, tactlessly if unwittingly, provided the excuse for the break-away of the northern tribes.

(iii) *Solomon's defence cities.* Was it with this background of insecurity in the northern kingdom, and an attitude of hostility on the part of Egypt, that Solomon built his 'defence cities' (1 Kgs. 9:15-19)? Hazor and Megiddo, controlling the main trade routes, were obviously strategic cities to fortify, but these two, together with Gezer and Lower Beth-horon, effectively ringed the northern tribes and would discourage any attempted link-up with Egypt. Solomon's defence cities, in fact, seem intended to prevent internal rebellion by the northern

---

[10] Cf. John Gray, *I and II Kings* (1964), 283.

tribes as much as to provide security against external aggression. We cannot be sure when these cities were built, but the fortifying of Gezer and Lower Beth-horon may indicate a period of unfriendly relations with Egypt, and since building operations in the earlier part of Solomon's reign appears to have been concentrated in Jerusalem and its environs (1 Kgs. 6:1-7:51 cf. 9:10), the probability is that the major works of fortification in the provinces were in the period of Shishak's rule over Egypt.

A picture emerges, therefore, of a point when Solomon had to abandon any pretence of an equality between the two sections of his kingdom. Jeroboam's rebellion, prophetic opposition and Egyptian hostility virtually demanded an increased degree of subjection of the northern tribes, with the Israelites themselves providing the forced labour necessary to fortify the cities enforcing that subjection. This, together with the already heavy burden of taxation, would certainly make Israelites 'second-class citizens' and provided an increasing escalation of discontent which erupted after the death of Solomon.

[p.39]

(e) *The Disruption*

We conclude our study with a few brief observations concerning the differences in organisation between Judah and Israel at this point. The accession of Rehoboam in Judah appears to have been automatic, with the principle of dynastic rule through the Davidic covenant being firmly accepted. This did not obtain in the north, however. Rehoboam presented himself at Shechem, subsequently the first capital of Jeroboam's kingdom and already a vitally important covenantal centre (cf. Deut. 27; Josh. 24; Judg. 9:6), for the acceptance of the northern tribes, possibly by acclamation (cf. 1 Sam. 10:24; 2 Kgs. 11:12). That he regarded it, mistakenly, as a mere formality, is incidental; what is important is that his accession involved a negotiated convenantal agreement with 'the assembly of Israel', a constituted body which still functioned in spite of almost eighty years of 'united monarchy' under David and Solomon (cf. the negotiations of 2 Sam. 3:17-21; 5:3 which reveal a similar pattern). Constitutionally, there were still two kingdoms, not one, and the renewed cry of 1 Kgs. 12:16 (cf. 2 Sam. 20:1) shows how deep-seated was the hostility and desire for independence of the northern tribes. There was a 'united monarchy' in the sense that one king ruled over Israel as well as Judah, but any essential unity was conspicuously lacking.