

# Scripture **from** Scratch

*A popular guide to understanding the Bible*

ISRAEL VS.



Illustrations by Steve Erspamer, S.M.

## THE CHOSEN PEOPLE DIVIDED BY VIRGINIA SMITH

JUDAH

Jesus' remark, "And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand" (Mark 3:25) may well be a melancholy remembrance of a time when his own nation experienced a division that was never reconciled. "That house" (the House of David) indeed did not stand. Israel's fall took place nearly a thousand years before Jesus' day, but because the event was one of the defining moments of Israelite history, the memory remained surprisingly fresh and acutely painful throughout the long centuries.

Conflicts that sunder a people previously united by geography, ethnicity, religious faith or political affinity have deeper, more lasting effects than any other kind. These clashes pit brother against brother, sometimes literally.

People with a long and close association find themselves facing each other at opposite ends of a sword or, today, automatic rifle. Even after the weapons are laid aside, an atmosphere of bitterness and mistrust remains for years, sometimes generations, even centuries. In our own time, we have witnessed the sad situations of East and West Germany, North and South Korea, Northern Ireland and the Republic to the south, and of course, the American War between the States.

You can begin to see how the split between Israel and Judah could have had an indelible influence on the thinking of Jesus' ancestors through the ensuing centuries and be reflected in his own thought and teaching. Let's see what really happened.

## The Notion of Nation

The concept of a national identity wasn't an option until the day the first Israelite lifted a muddy sandal out of the Jordan riverbed and planted it on Canaanite soil. This event transpired near the end of the 13th century B.C.E. under the leadership of Moses' former military aide, Joshua. The biblical book that bears his name is, first to last, the story of his efforts to settle the Israelites in the land promised to Abraham roughly 600 years earlier.

As is usually the case with biblical writings, the Book of Joshua is best read in a single sitting as one would a riveting adventure tale. It is well to remember that, while most of the books in the Hebrew canon from Joshua through Nehemiah are generally termed historical, they should not be viewed as histories.

Today's reader expects a volume of history to provide documented, chronological events containing verifiable names and dates. The Bible's historical books promise none of that. For the most part, they do tell of happenings that actually occurred, but time frame, characters, details comprised of fact-based data are often hazy, contradictory or absent altogether. For this, our ancestors should not be faulted. They simply did not put the emphasis on this sort of material that we do.

So did Joshua lead the Israelites into Canaan? No doubt. Did it happen precisely as it is recorded in the Bible? Probably not. Does it matter? Yes and no. Sometimes the simple truth that it happened is of infinitely greater import than how or when or where.

As Israelite leader trying to walk in Moses' rather intimidating footsteps, Joshua had two primary tasks: (1) to bring the tribes of Israel into Canaan, a

daunting chore given the resident Canaanites' immigration policies; (2) to distribute land among the tribes once they were all more or less there and settled. By the end of his life, the mission was accomplished on at least an elemental level. So then Israel was a nation? Well, no.

## The Years of Turmoil and Chaos

Most of the 12th and 11th centuries B.C.E. were devoted to survival. Having never before lived a sedentary life, the Israelites were predictably inept at it. Farms, orchards and vineyards were foreign to them. Following Joshua's death, no one assumed the role of central leadership, leaving little more than a rough confederation of autonomous tribes. None of the tribes was terribly strong, resulting in a constant pummeling by their neighbors.

Those who would have ridden in wearing the white hats, had horses and hats been available, were called the judges. Their individual and collective stories are chronicled, not surprisingly, in the

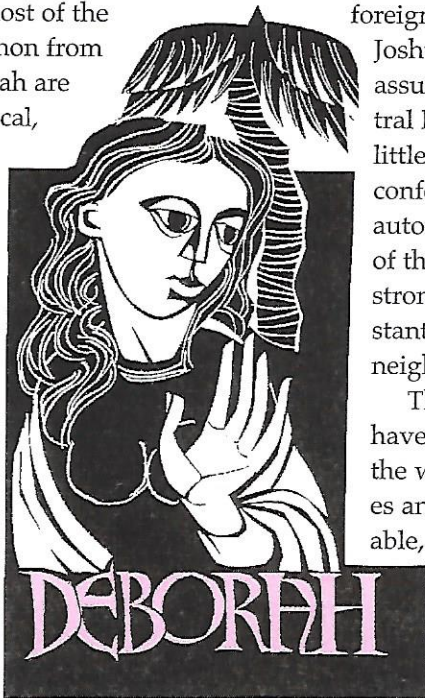
Book of Judges. No gavel-wielding, robe-swishing jurists these. Biblical

judges are hero figures who save the day, dispatch the villain and disappear once more. Some of them are familiar to us: Deborah, Gideon, Samson. Others fall into the general category of: Who?

As one might expect, a couple of centuries of being the weak, unwelcome, victimized strangers in a new land was more than enough. Change was needed and desperately wanted. An inter-tribal delegation arrived before the last and greatest of the judges, Samuel, and petitioned him to anoint a king for them (1 Sm 8). And so began the march toward monarchy and real national identity.

Samuel in his wisdom points out the considerable downside of being ruled by a king (1 Samuel 8:10-18). Demonstrating that some of human nature's more endearing qualities don't change very much, the people want what they want when they want it and they proceed—confident that any such evils which may have befallen others will never happen to them. If you read the passage and listen closely, you may still hear Samuel's resigned sigh rise from the page as, flask in hand, he sets off to anoint the first king of Israel, a handsome lad named Saul.

There is no time in this article to discuss Saul's checkered career. You can read all about Saul and his 'way ups and 'way, 'way downs in beginning in 1 Samuel 9. If the Israelites had given little initial credence to Samuel's predictions about a king, their ears should have been perked up remarkably during Saul's reign.



### Praying With Scripture

- **How often do we pray for our nation? And what do we pray for when we do? Nations like individuals are in constant need of God's guidance. Do we ask God to be on "our side" during conflicts? At this particular moment in time, which of your nation's needs should you be taking to God in prayer?**

## The First Good Shepherd

First anointed by Samuel to take the throne from Saul after his death (1 Sm 16:1-13), David, Jesse's young shepherd son, was later anointed king of Judah in Hebron (2 Sm 2:1-4). Traditionally the site of the tomb of Abraham, Hebron of late has been the scene of much Israeli/Palestinian infighting. In 2 Samuel 5:1-5, David was anointed king over all Israelite tribes, and Israel was launched upon its brief shining moment as a national entity.

David's reign over all of Israel spanned some 40 years (2 Sm 5:4-5, 1 Kgs 2:11) as did Solomon's, his son and successor (1 Kgs 11:42). While it is true that 40 is often used as a round number in biblical writings and thus may be inexact, there's no reason to doubt that both men occupied Israel's throne for several decades, David from c. 1010-970 B.C.E., Solomon from c. 970-930 B.C.E. To paraphrase Charles Dickens, these years constituted "the best of times" for Israel but ended as the first light of "the worst of times" began to dawn.

For all his many personal and professional transgressions, David was an able monarch whose military experience helped him coalesce the fragmented tribal units into a single nation. Later history would view David as the ideal king, and God promised that someone of the Davidic line would occupy Israel's throne forever (2 Sm 7:8-16). David left Solomon a kingdom whose boundaries had been expanded and secured.

Solomon in turn built his inheritance into a secular power that commanded respect. He launched a building program so extensive and magnificent it would have done credit to the Egyptian pharaohs. The crown jewel of his efforts was the First Temple whose description bog-



## Living the Scriptures

■ **John F. Kennedy urged us to "ask what you can do for your country". As God-centered people, how might be answer that call? What could our special contribution be? What one concrete action might be taken right now?**

gles even the modern mind (1 Kgs 6—8).

The construction of such mighty edifices, then as now, required two things in abundance: manpower and money. The manpower came from conscripted Israelite labor; the money, from confiscated Israelite purses. At his death, Solomon left Israel shining in the sun, proud but poor.

## Bad Advice Is Nearly Always Taken

Enter Rehoboam (1 Kgs 11:43). In light of the wide and varied selection of sons Solomon left behind, one would think there might have been a sharper knife in the drawer than Rehoboam. It's a moot point, however, since Rehoboam it was—young and inexperienced.

The overworked, overtaxed Israelites approached their new monarch with a perfectly reasonable request. They would serve Rehoboam if only he would ease their considerable burden. Ever the quick thinker, Rehoboam tells them to return for an answer in three days. During

that time, he wisely consults members of his father's court who advise him to grant the people's request. He also unwisely consults his peers who

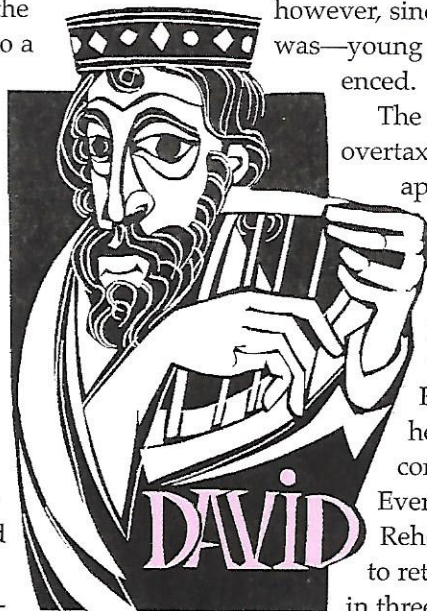
advise him to let the people know who's boss right from the get go. This may well qualify as the worst advice bestowed anywhere in the Bible, so, of course, it is snapped up instantly.

Upon receiving the news that things were likely to get a whole lot worse before getting even a little bit better, ten tribes seceded, leaving the Davidic throne and its inept occupant ruling only the southern tribes of Judah and tiny Benjamin. For their part, the ten northern tribes made a man named Jeroboam their king. He promptly set up new political and religious centers, including shrines focused on golden calves at Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12).

Because Jerusalem was situated within Judah's tribal territory, certain valuable assets fell to the southern kingdom by default. These included the capital city, the Temple and the throne of David. David, having been born in Bethlehem, was a Judahite by birth. The royal line created for the northern kingdom was tolerated but never truly accepted by the Davidic descendants, some of whom were in no position to look down their royal noses at anybody.

King Omri (c. 885-874 B.C.E.) established Samaria as the northern capital (1 Kgs 16:23-24). Eventually, a new center of worship would emerge nearby at Mount Gerizim.

The tragedy of Israel's schism was multifaceted. Most obvious is the fact that with the dissolution of the united monarchy, Israel's hard-won glory days were permanently ended. Before long, the skinny little land bridge that was home to Israel and Judah would know the tramp of many a foreign foot

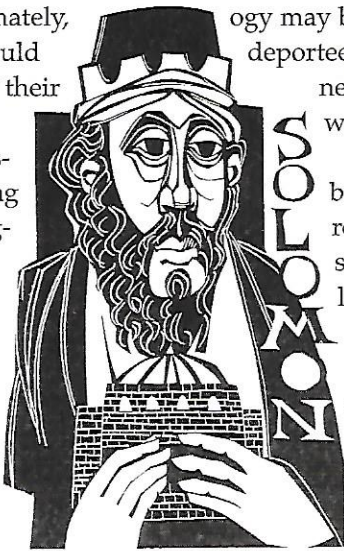


as nations more powerful than they crisscrossed it en route to great power struggles elsewhere. Ultimately, first Israel, then Judah would fall to the superpowers of their day.

Perhaps the most devastating result of the severing of the nation was the long-standing animosities that grew from it. As so often happens in so-called civil conflicts, people closely related ethnically, religiously, culturally, politically, historically viewed one another with wary suspicion, condescension, even abomination as they grew further and further apart. Sometimes, as was the case with America's War Between the states, unity is reestablished, but even then, wounds are a long time healing. Perhaps they never entirely do.

## No Happy Ending

In 722-721 B.C.E., the king of the vast Assyrian Empire (whose capital, Nineveh, was located in modern Iraq) eyed the northern kingdom of Israel, found its loyalty wanting, and annihilated it in the blink of an eye. 2 Kings 17 tells the tale: how the Assyrians imprisoned the Israelite king, occupied the land, besieged Samaria for three years, and finally deported the majority of Israelites, scattering them throughout Assyria's vast holdings.



These became known as the ten lost tribes because, although that terminology may be a simplification, the deportees and their descendents never appeared on the world stage again.

In their place, Assyria brought people from the far reaches of its empire and settled them on Israel's land and in its cities. Over seven centuries later, after generations of intermingling and intermarrying with the remaining Israelites, the people of this area would be known as Samaritans, despised by the Jews of Jesus' day for their mixed blood and unorthodox religion.

The southern kingdom, Judah, managed to survive another 135 years. By that time, superpower status had passed from Assyria to Babylonia. In a scenario reminiscent of Israel's in the north, Judah found itself the target of the fearsome Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. Jerusalem, too, was besieged. King Zedekiah was blinded and hustled off to Babylon. And in the end, the Judahites, like their northern relatives, were marched into exile. They would remain in Babylon roughly half a century. Once Persia usurped power from Babylon, the exiles were allowed to return home, making the end of their story, told in 2 Kings 25, very different from Israel's.

Upon their return to Judah in 538 B.C.E., the surviving remnant faced the

daunting task of rebuilding literally from the ground up. This was the beginning of a period known as the Restoration, similar in some ways to the period of Reconstruction in the American South. Although they would work at it with varying degrees of success throughout the decades and centuries ahead, they would never entirely complete the undertaking. From that point forward, Judah would know much foreign influence, none more forceful than Rome's arrival in 63 B.C.E., turning Judah into the Roman province of Judea and ending even a nominal trace of the nation that once was.

That nation would not reappear on any map until the modern state of Israel was established in 1947.

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**Next: Ezekiel (by Irene Nowell, O.S.B.)**

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## Talking About Scripture

- **War criminals brought to trial often pose the defense that they were only following orders given in the service of their country. What biblical principles are at stake here? How do individuals understand their obligations to their God and to their nation?**



## Reading About Scripture

- **Cahill, Thomas. *The Gifts of the Jews*. New York: Doubleday, 1998.**