

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Forty-Third Week - Friday

THE SCHISM

"And Jeroboam said in his heart, 'Now the kingdom may return to the house of David: If these people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of Yahweh at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn back to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and go back to Rehoboam king of Judah.' Therefore the king asked advice, made two calves of gold, and said to the people, 'It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!' And he set up one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan" (1 Kings 12:26-29).

Jeroboam fortified and made Shechem his capital. But he soon perceived that Jerusalem, being the seat of the temple and of all ritual service, was the real metropolis of the whole nation. It would remain a center of union to all the tribes notwithstanding the political separation which had taken place. His subjects would travel to Jerusalem at the yearly festivals and convey their dues and offerings, and this alone would give an immense superiority of dignity and prosperity to Judah. Was it to be expected that the ten tribes would be long content to remain in their condition of religious inferiority and separation?

To Jeroboam the danger seemed so serious that he neglected no means in order to avert it. It appeared clear that no effectual remedy could be found except in altering those laws based on the unity of the nation. Thus Jeroboam decided to establish two places of ritual worship, one in the north of his kingdom at Dan and the other in the south at Bethel. This was enacted under the plausible excuse that Jerusalem was too distant for visits at the annual festivals. In the absence of the ark and cherubim, he set up a golden calf, or young bull, at each place as a symbolic figure consecrated to Jehovah, and not, as we may be apt to imagine, as an idolatrous representation of any other god. In his point of view, it might have seemed as lawful as the cherubim; and it may indeed have been intended as a partial substitute for the cherubim of the temple and tabernacle.

But the words he used in inviting the attention of the people to this image--"Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!"--were the same that Aaron employed in the wilderness with regard to the golden calf, thus showing that Jeroboam had that case in view; and since he knew the history connected with it, he also knew how severely that act had been condemned and punished. This was not idolatry consisting in the worship of strange

gods, but it was an infraction of the law which forbade any representation or symbol of Jehovah. It was a degradation to liken the glory of the invisible God to an ox that eats grass, and it was a step toward that direct idolatry against which the law so sedulously guarded. But in Jeroboam's case it went further, adding the sin of schism among a people intended to be religiously united beyond any other, and whose most important institutions were framed on that basis.

It was probably his design merely to establish local shrines to Jehovah with little change in the mode and circumstances of worship. But having begun in this evil way, he felt compelled to proceed farther than he had contemplated, and for this he was not prepared. Many Levitical cities were in his dominions, and he concluded that many priests and Levites would be found to conduct this worship. But the Levitical body repudiated the whole idea and refused to lend it the prestige of their name and influence. When Jeroboam forbade them to attend to their regular courses at the temple of Jerusalem, they abandoned their cities, their fields, and their pleasant homes where they had been born and brought up. Shaking the dust of a polluted land from their feet, they departed to the southern kingdom.

Jeroboam was first confounded by this movement, which at once gave his established worship the stamp of inferiority, and thus he had to seek priests out of the non-clerical tribes. But finding no persons of character willing to undertake the office, he proceeded to ordain priests from "the lowest of the people." These were people to whom the compensations of the office were an inducement, and to whom the credit of belonging to even a degraded priesthood was an honor. To keep up appearances, at least at first, Jeroboam himself assumed the office of high priest, and as such he officiated in the solemn ministrations when present at Dan or Bethel at the three yearly festivals.

Perhaps the most generally popular and best attended of these festivals was that of autumn--the Feast of Tabernacles. The time of this festival was changed to a month later--a most unauthorized and high-handed innovation for which it is difficult to account but by supposing that Jeroboam wished to widen the difference as much as possible.