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FACULTY OF ORTHODOX THEOLOGY  
„ISIDOR TODORAN” DOCTORAL SCHOOL**

**THE NORTHERN KINGDOM OF ISRAEL  
(926-721 B.C.) – BACKGROUND AND  
RELIGIOUS AND THEOLOGICAL  
FRAMEWORK**

**– DOCTORAL THESIS –**

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**CLUJ-NAPOCA  
2019**

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## Abstract

### KEY-WORDS

Israel, tribes, kingdom, Jeroboam I, idolatry

The Kingdom of Israel or The Northern Kingdom is marked, during its entire existence, by a reality applicable to the entire Old Testament: the fight between Yahwism and Baalism or, in other words, the fight between idolatry and the faithfulness of the chosen people to Living God. Though the Books of Kings are part of the vetero-testamentary historical writings, these abound in theological teachings.

The historical events during the kingship in Israel, contain theological specificities that place them above other purely historical events. The historical theological text in these writings is redeeming and encompasses the spiritual depth of an inspired writing that is meant to create the premises of salvation of the fallen man by guiding him to the will of God. The temptation of the autonomy that seized Jeroboam I, the first king of the north, was fatal to him. Breaking the political and religious ties with Jerusalem would take him away from all the blessings God promised. It appears that the effects of this split were not so devastating for the Israelite peoples. However, the return to the cult of the patriarchs and the religious service held on the high promoted by the reform of King Jeroboam marked a significant setback for some of the tribes of Israel. What had to be a breakthrough, for this is what any reform should provide, had become an irretrievable fall.

This distancing from the God of Covenant led to a curse from which the Israelite throne would only escape through the Assyrian exile, for the Jeroboam's curse weighted on the majority of the Samaria's kings, with few exceptions. The Lord intervenes through prophets, in the cases of Elijah and Elisha, through statesmen: Jehu or Jeroboam II and through foreign kings: Tiglath-Pileser with the purpose of constantly straightening Israel out and setting it on the path of salvation. The disobedience and the Jeroboam's curse finally led to the Assyrian exile considered by the Israelites as a real national catastrophe. Nevertheless, Lord did not leave them during the exile either, as this one served as a prefiguration of accepting the peoples in the blessings of the Spirit of Christ. The chosen people has never been abandoned. The exile due to disobedience was a blessing moment for peoples brought by the Assyrians on the holy land of Israel. The

Israelites' suffering, on the other hand, extended the openness of the covenant to the peoples. It is from this perspective that we could see and analyze the exile.

The entire history of Jeroboam I was an announcement of the exile, one that could have been avoided if the Israelites had given up their „idols”, meaning their own selfishness and search for self-government. The reception of the peoples brought by the Assyrians for colonization was announced by the Solomon's prayer since the consecration of the Temple, but we highlighted this fact during the activity of Elijah the prophet. YHWH's universal sovereignty manifested itself in the expansion of the drought beyond the traditional borders of Israel, dismantling the cultural and religious beliefs of the time that a certain deity was circumscribed to a particular region or important city.

Using the drought leitmotif in his journey beyond the traditional borders of Israel, Elijah evinces the existence of a „spiritual drought” among the pagans, that caused a spiritual hunger, which could not be satisfied by a deity who slept during the dry season in the Middle-East (a Canaanite idea presenting Baal sleeping during the dry season and then waking up to bring the rainy season). Therefore, Elijah's prophetic activity opens up the theological subject of the universal salvation, so to be completed then (and outlined much more clearly) with the moment of the exile and the peoples' arrival on the territory of Israel. A relevant fact in this respect was that after the northern population's exile, Lord concludes a new covenant with those brought on the land of Israel by Sargon II, reminding them that He is the Lord who brought them out of the country of Egypt. But these came from over the Assyrian empire and had no connection with the south-western Mediterranean area. Egypt is given here an allegorical meaning, illustrating the ignorance of God's truth as well as the spiritual wandering. Ignoring the Lord was the Egypt of those who came from the Assyrian territories and Lord places them in the light of sinaitic knowledge by adding them to the promises already made to the Jews.

The highlighting of some essential theological elements from the historical books made the basis of our motivation for choosing the subject of research. We tried to demonstrate the fact that 3 and 4 Kings do not only set out rows of kings, years and events, but these books describe a tumultuous history containing events that can be very well applied to our lives. The texts in the historical books contain social and theological saving teachings and provide examples of the way peoples should relate to God. Most important though, one can find clear points of God's intervention in history. Through the historical books and, more exactly in our case, through the

historical traceability of the Kingdom of Israel, we can observe the existence of a saving logic of God, helping us understand how and to which purpose He intervenes in people's life during history. In our opinion, observing the lives of some key-characters from the history of the Kingdom of Israel: Elijah, Elisha, Jehu, Jeroboam I or Jeroboam II, can help us make our own self-reflection through comparison with the lives of these people who were capable of receiving God's blessings. Some managed to enable and acquire them, though their life and conduct. For others, these remained only a possibility, for they strayed away through their selfish decisions. It is also our belief that a deeper understanding of some theological topics from the Books of the Kings, such as YHWH's universal sovereignty or the acceptance of the new peoples in covenant with the Lord, contributes to a better understanding of the new testamentary writings, which contain an extensive approach of these topics (they mention chiefly the Acts of the Apostles and some of Saint Paul's writings).

In addition to these aspects, the main purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that the political measures taken during the period immediately following the split of the Kingdom of Israel, which had significant consequences for the social life, have also undermined the people's religious life which regressed, making them fall into idolatry. The distancing from Jerusalem and the Temple where God had promised to dwell had terrible consequences for the chosen people. There was no other temple that could provide religious and national unity to the Lord's chosen people. This perspective will be therefore emphasized throughout the entire paper, namely that the distancing from the true God through an illegitimate and regressive serving leads to sin and bondage.

In this research we used the historical critical method and, sometimes, the anagogic method. The text was organized in such a way that allowed for a gradual ownership and understanding. We started with the historical dimension of the text, which emphasizes the elements indicating the spiritual regression of the people as a result of some social choices and political measures. At the same time, we tried to identify certain teachings that we could take into account nowadays. Since the paper's approach is a historical one, the primary sources used are those historical critical, with references to the patrological literature, when needed, and emphasis on the rabbinic perspectives with the purpose of finding out how the subject was received in the Christian and Jewish literature.

Regarding the body of the paper, this will be structured in ten chapters.

If we were to provide some details on the chapters' content, we would say that starting with the beginning of this paper, we set out to draw the main historical landmarks which led to the founding of the two kingdoms. At this stage, our focus was on highlighting the causal relationships between the historic events, which provided the basis for the theological part later developed. The first chapter is marked by the stress laid on the historical events and their political and social interpretation. What interested us most at this point were the political processes and the psychological perceptions in regards to the institutional organization. The way in which Israel attempted to define itself politically over the years through passing from a tribal society, to a confederation of tribes united under one leader, led to the establishment of the monarchy institution. This socio-political reality will serve as a basis for all the daily social and theological processes of Israel. The first chapter is fundamentally related to the last chapter: if the former deals with the way Israel seeks to survive as a state among the neighbouring states and how it builds its institutions, the latter acknowledges the failure of the monarchy and the transition, with the Assyrian exile, to a new stage of „anarchy". Israel will seek to further understand and reinvent itself, however, without the awareness that YHWH is the ultimate supreme purpose of life, this process will be one very sinuous and doomed to fail. Please note that each chapter ends with sectional conclusions.

In the following chapters, we examined some personality aspects of King Jeroboam I, the founder of the Northern Kingdom, who had a choice whether or not to bring to date the prospective blessings Lord had given him. State reasons force Jeroboam to ostracize the theological component from the administrative life of the kingdom, by creating artificial institutions in parallel with the Jerusalem cult as a means to centralize the power and to prevent the centrifugal tendencies. The initiation of a new artificial priesthood, having no Aaronic lineage and not comprising members of the Levitical tribe, who were organized in two central cultic entities, Bethel and Dan, drew a curse upon the holder of the throne of the Northern Kingdom. The curse will be reiterated by the author of the books of Deuteronomy to every king who will reign in the north (albeit for a short time) using the following expressions: Jeroboam's sin, namely the disobedience, the desire for autonomy and ranking the state reasons above the theological considerations.

In the section on the history of kings following the reign of Jeroboam I, we exposed the violent means used for acceding to the throne. Political instability and insecure climate were

seen as consequences of Jeroboam's sin in which his successors have fallen. At the same time, this section incorporates compared presentations with Juda's kingdom and the occurrence of the first frictions. Based on the idea that threats reach their destination harder on long distances, the two kingdoms with distinct administrations but part of the same nation have become rivals in the geopolitical context of the Middle East.

The most significant theological part of our paper accounts the activity of Elijah the prophet. We began this section by highlighting and explaining some topics such as the prophetic calling, the nature of the political-religious relationship, and then we examined in detail the prophet's journey beyond Israel's traditional boundaries. The central theological subject we aimed to point out was YHWH's universal sovereignty defined in the conflict between Yahwism and Baalism. Drought and general famine served as a symbolic background for the search of a spiritual meaning which Israelites –due to being committed to idolatry and the peoples – by reason of not knowing God, could not satisfy. The fact that the drought extends outside Israel is an indication of God's unbounded sovereignty. Through his journey, Elijah breaks the Canaanite cultural barriers which claimed that a deity was circumscribed to a particular region or city. The conflict between *Yahwism* and *Baalism* culminates in the said chapter with the confrontation on the Mount Carmel. The prophet gather here all the tribes of Israel, like once Moses, ignoring the political differences, making them partakers of God's power and authenticity. The fact that God refers to His people as being one, is revealed by the 12 stones raised by Elijah as an altar.

Following our paper, we reapproached some political questions related to military confrontations and regional geopolitical plots which involved Israel. The focus is on the activity of King Ahab and the cultural importation of Samaria experienced with the developing of a dynastic regime which endows king's wife, Jezebel, with discretionary powers. In relation to the prophetic succession Elijah-Elisha, it is noteworthy to mention that the latter resumes Elijah's journey, acting as the only authentic theological element in the kingdom who manages to keep awake people's awareness of YHWE. Meaningful events such as those from Nabot's story, reiterate the subject of God's universal sovereignty suveranității, as well as the idea that peoples are called to meet Him and to worship Him.

The concluding content of the paper, draws the exile path starting with the consistent disobedience of God and finishing with a series of awkward political plots belonging to the last Northern king. The Assyrian kings are seen as God's instruments used for carrying out His plan



and which help Him actually intervene in history. Therefore, all the biblical characters fall within the scope of God's rule, each of them performing the role God, in His wisdom, considered for them. The exile is a political event considered as being catastrophic, but which conveys sound theological meanings. It shows that God chooses a different people towards whom He can extend the promises already made to the Jews. This new people represented by the colonists brought by the Assyrians accept the covenant, becoming partakers of the blessings by adoption. It is a notable parallel of the new testamentary topic of accepting peoples coming to God by receiving the Holy Spirit as a result of their faith into Christ. The chosen people has never been abandoned in exile. The exile is just another stage where Israel is reinventing itself, thus liberating itself from a form of organization somewhat deficient – the monarchy, which God had disclaimed from the beginning.

Finally, we discussed the problematics of the Assyrian exile and its implications from a theological and historical perspective. We analyzed the historical data and the actual process of the exile, over which we built the sound theological implications that we have identified in this important event from the history of Israel.

The uniqueness of this paper is given by the focus aimed on its objectives, namely the interpretation of some theological teachings from the historical books based on facts and events which occurred in a particular historical period of the chosen people. We sought to find out how the historical events in the Northern Kingdom and the life of some key characters may serve as spiritual models that we could embrace in our daily religious practice. Moreover, the chronological approach of the social political events in the Kingdom of Israel allowed us to point out an aspect of the way in which God intervenes in history in benefit of the people. All these aspects corroborated with allegorical interpretations of different events in the kingdom's life helped us clarify both some old as well as some more recent conceptions on the existence of a cruel God in the Old Testament. If we read these events as prefigurations of blessings in Christ, we notice God's longsuffering and the wisdom of His saving plan.

To carry out the research project, we used references that ensured the consistency of information and emphasis of some key details. Regarding the existence of a literature strongly represented by field-related journals, the resources from outside the Romanian area are abundant. Most of the identified and revised field-related articles belong to important publications such as Brill, JSTOR, Sage Publishing and Journal of Biblical Literature.

From the Romanian literature we used mainly the books related to the prophetic activities, especially those of Elijah and Elisha, most of the studies coming from this area. Many studies embrace a holistic perspective on the Yahwism – Baalism conflict. The section of political analysis and theological overlapping with the events in the books of kings has proved itself lacunal in the Romanian literature.

Israel began to function as a nation in a tribal form, then as a united confederation of tribes more or less cohesive. Then followed the monarchical stage, after which Israel splitted away only to recover and reinvent itself as a nation after the exile (in the way of social political organization). Two essential features have been identified in different stages throughout Israel's historical existence. These features are contradictory and lay the foundation of the theological development of salvation, indicating at the same time the way God intervenes in history: people's disobedience and God's consistency in remaining the God of Israel. Irrespective of Israel's form of organization, disobedience to the Lord proved to be a constant characteristics. Despite this, God never gives up to His people and never withdraws the promises made to Israelites' parents. Those remain eternally valid, although His interventions in history are meant to make Jews aware of the fact that their own behaviours condition the manifestation of these promises.

The institution of monarchy was claimed by the people, the king having to assume the commandments which provided the heredity and the unity of it. An essential mission was, therefore, monitoring the law enforcement which enabled the tribes to preserve and develop the energies responsible for the social, cultural but especially religious balance. The division of the Kingdom of David resulted in a loss of traditions and a separation of a significant number of the population from the Temple, the source of blessings. Although considered a progress by the northern people, the separation from the southern people was conclusive for the loss of the latter under the great empires that bought the enslavement. Idolatry that grew strongly at the beginning in Dan and Bethel could not make its way without the replacement of the Levite priests (3 Kings 12,26-33).

We believe that the similarities between the Aaron's era and the one beginning with Jeroboam's I reign are only formal, since the attitude of most of the kings in the Northern Kingdom is in fact against the religious life. The return to the old altars of Penuel, Shechem and

Tirzah was a clear setback for the religious life, by circumventing the Sinaitic laws, which formed the basis of scaffolding the Mosaic cult.

. In the justifying equation of those from the North, both the prototype value of the patriarchs and the frustrations accumulated over time played a significant role through the unity paradigm proposed to Israel's tribes. The resulting tension gave way to the challenges between YHWH's worshippers and those of Baal.

If the prophetes tried to continuously promote respect and awareness of the teachings' values revealed by YHWH, the northern syncretism, in turn, always represented a concern, holding a privileged position in the political agenda of the kings and being considered an element of political, social and cultural progress. For the people of the Northern Kingdom, the cult, the essential identity of Jacob's descendants, became the area of exchanges of some eterogenous rituals. The instability in the Northern Kingdom is the natural consequence undergone by the ten tribes after breaking their own promisses made to Ebal and Gerizim – cities that belong to them and blamed them. The true kingship is the one residing in David's unity and succession as well as in its mediation function between God and His people.

Throughout the books 3, 4 Kings, God attempts through chosen people such as Elijah, Elisha and these at their turn, through Jehu, to thwart Israel's plan of self-destruction. Since Jeroboam's reign, the Northern Kingdom entered a degrading slope both morally and religiously. The chosen people's actions would draw the curses exposed in Lv 26, which would culminate with the seizure of their land and their chasing and wandering among strangers, seen as unworthy of the land entrusted them by God and conquered by their ancestors under the reign of Joshua. The tribes Joshua placed carefully and strategically would be wiped out in their historic and traditional territory and doomed to wandering on foreign land as slaves like in times past. Therefore, God seeks to determine the rulers (for they are those who "draw Israel to sin") to adhere to and fulfill the Sinaitic covenant. All the seeming foreign interventions, calamities, drought, military invasions, the time of external constraints, political instability and the summoning of powerful prophetes able to perform miracles were meant to bring Israel out of the way of curse and place it on the path of blessings waiting to be outpoured over the people. We notice that Lord transgresses His covenant in the way that He demonstrates a kindness that goes beyond the law, that He is longsuffering towards the people, adjourning what had to become a

national disaster for Israel; all these out of love for the people, from the parental wish to see them returned to what they were called to be.

What the Books of Kings reveal is that the entity of Israel, meaning the chosen people and not the Northern Kingdom separated from Judah, does not need a king, a royal court or a central cult to exist in history as authentic Israel. The real nature of Israel resides in its loyalty towards YHWH, manifested through righteous acts exemplified by the Deuteronomy's author in the case of Nabot. The end of the book 4 Kings does not make any difference between the two kingdoms for neither the north or the south manage to define their destiny according to Lord's will, the people from both kingdoms being exiled. The kingship era was one in which Israel made efforts to define its identity. However this process did not end with the exile but continued even after that. No institution will ever be able to emulate with God as a factor of absolut unity. Until Israel understands this matter, the process of defining its identity will move on.