

**Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings**  
**By Rav Alex Israel**

**Shiur #16: Chapter 14:21-31**

**Rehavam: Three Sources - Three perspectives**

When we read the compact account of Rechavam's reign in *Sefer Melakhim*, we can discern three main topics:

1. The idolatry of Yehudah
2. The invasion by Shishak, king of Egypt, in Rechavam's 5<sup>th</sup> year
3. The copper shields

The account of Rechavam's reign begins with a disturbing depiction of widespread idolatrous practices in the kingdom of Yehuda:

And Yehuda<sup>1</sup> did evil in the sight of God and angered Him more than their fathers had done by the sins that they committed. They too<sup>2</sup> built *bamot*, pillars and *asherim* on every high hill and under every leafy tree; there were also sacred prostitution (*kadesh*) in the land. Yehuda imitated all the abhorrent practices of the nations that God had dispossessed before the Israelites. (14:22-24)

This is wide-ranging list of problematic practices which bear a strong connection to pagan and idolatrous rituals:

1. *bamot*
2. pillars (*matzevot*)
3. *asherim*
4. *kadesh*

Three of these elements are mentioned together in the Torah. The pillars and *asherim* are associated with a ritual altar in *Parashat Shoftim*:

Do not plant an *ashera*, any tree, next to the altar of the Lord your God that you make, and do not erect a pillar, for such the Lord your God detests. (*Devarim* 16:21)

There are two options in evaluating these practices. The first approach perceives them in a neutral light, as religious media widespread in the ancient

---

<sup>1</sup> The use of the phrase "Yehuda" is interesting here. Does it indicate the people of Yehuda or the House of Yehudah – Rechavam himself (as indicated by Targum Yonatan)?

<sup>2</sup> "They too" would appear to mean that Yehuda had followed in the footsteps of Yisrael, who had engaged in illicit worship.

world, but not as an intrinsically evil.<sup>3</sup> The context in *Devarim* indicates that the *ashera* – the religious tree - would be planted adjacent to the "altar of the Lord your God." In other words, it is found in the environment of appropriate God worship.<sup>4</sup>

Any tree that is planted at the entrance to a house of worship is given the appellation of an "*ashera*," possibly because it acts as a marker for that site. (Ramban, *Devarim* 16:21)

Likewise, Rashi reminds us that the *avot* built *matzevot* to God.<sup>5</sup> Rashi's comment in *Devarim* informs us of the vicissitudes of the practice of the *matzeva*:

For such the Lord your God detests: a stone pillar upon which to sacrifice, even to Heaven ... God detests it, for it has become a practice of the Canaanites, **and even though it was beloved to God in the era of the patriarchs**, now God hates it due to the fact that [the Canaanites] have turned it into an idolatrous practice. (Rashi, *Devarim* 16:22)

On the other hand, one can view these practices as unmitigated idolatry. After all, the upshot of Rashi is that in the landscape of Canaan, the practices of building *matzevot* had become thoroughly idolatrous. Indeed, the *Ashera* is frequently associated with the pagan deity Ba'al.<sup>6</sup> Whereas the Ba'al constituted the male aspect of the rain god, the *Ashera* tree functioned as its female counterpart. The rain (Ba'al) fertilizes the earth and gives fruit to the tree (*Ashera*); this fertility rite was enacted in the pagan temples in the form of the *kadesh* and *kedesha*,<sup>7</sup> a ritual sexual act that was supposed to enact the union of the gods.

According to this second perspective, the composite image of altars, *ashera*, pillars, and *kadesh* amounts to a terrible descent into idolatrous norms. The depiction of these idolatrous artifacts "on every high hill and under every leafy tree" raises a direct connection to the categorical instruction of *Devarim* 12:2-3 to destroy and eradicate sites of *avoda zara* worship in the land. In that chapter, the choice of a single site for the Temple is contrasted with the heinous impropriety of Canaan's pagan culture and its multiplicity of sacred sites. The recurrence of this phrase here in *Melakhim* underscores the severity of the abrogation and its antithesis to the *Mikdash*.

In this context, we should reread the introductory line that articulates the spiritual designation of Jerusalem: "Rechavam was 41 years old when he became king and he reigned 17 years in Jerusalem, **the city the Lord had chosen out of all the tribes of Israel to establish His name there**" (14:21).

---

<sup>3</sup> This is certainly the approach of the Ibn Ezra on *Devarim* 16:21-22, where he clearly states that a pillar built for purposes other than idolatry is not forbidden.

<sup>4</sup> See *Bereshit* 21:33, where Avraham plants a tree and calls out in God's name.

<sup>5</sup> Yaakov does so in *Bereshit* 28:18, 35:14; see also *Shmuel* I 7:12.

<sup>6</sup> See *Shoftim* 3:7, 6:25, 10:6; *Shmuel* I 12:10; *Melakhim* I 16:32-33, 18:19; *Melakhim* II 21:3, 24:4.

<sup>7</sup> See *Devarim* 23:18

This verse takes on a fresh meaning<sup>8</sup> as it reminds us that Yerushalayim is "the place that God has chosen" in which to establish His name. On the backdrop of all this idolatry, this *passuk* makes a statement about the extreme shortfall that lies between the current state and Jerusalem's prescribed destiny.

## SHISHAK

Upon this backdrop, we read of Shishak's attack on Jerusalem and his plunder of the royal buildings and the Temple treasury. We would not be remiss in drawing a connection between the idolatry of Yehuda and the invasion. Although this connection is never explicitly established by *Sefer Melakhim*, the context certainly implies the linkage. We will discuss this further in our comparison to *Divrei Ha-Yamim*.

## GOLDEN SHIELDS

The focus on the taking of the golden shields and their copper replacements needs some explanation. Why is so much attention devoted to this seemingly minor detail?

The shields are described as "all the golden shields which Shlomo made" (14:26), making specific reference to Shlomo Ha-Melekh. We have read about them in chapter 10 (vv. 16-17) in the account of the hefty influx of gold-tax that would flow into the royal treasury annually. This income is spent on a selection of indulgences, namely an elaborate throne, drinking cups of gold, and these decorative shields. Interestingly, *Chazal* read the phrase, "He took it ALL" (14:26) as denoting Shlomo's elaborate throne. In other words, these shields represent the splendor and wealth of the Solomonic era. Shishak is depicted as absolutely stripping the kingdom of the accumulated grandeur of Shlomo.

The contradistinction between these two sections could not be more pronounced. The strident confidence and the indulgence and opulence of Shlomo's majestic period finds itself shattered a mere five years after his death, with all of Shlomo's signature fanciful works carted off to Egypt! One even senses a mockery of sorts as we read how there are not enough shields to go around. They are taken out for parades, but then quickly hung on the walls of the guardhouse. Whether this was done as an act of protection or as a means to display the shields,<sup>9</sup> the contrast with the magnificent golden shields confidently adorning Shlomo's grand "House of the Lebanon Forest" is surely deliberate, intending to underscore the disparity between the luxury of Shlomo and the pathetic imitation attempted by Rechavam.

## DIVREI HAYAMIM

---

<sup>8</sup> In *shiur* #15, we proposed that this phrase acts as a demarcation between the correct ritual of Jerusalem and the illicit religious rituals of Beit-El and Dan.

<sup>9</sup> See Radak.

The account of Rechavam in *Sefer Melakhim* is relatively straightforward. The narrative in *Divrei Ha-Yamim* (II ch.11-12), however, is filled with new details and provides a dramatically different impression. Let us attempt to summarize the structure of the account of Rechavam as it appears in *Divrei Ha-Yamim*.

11:5-12 – Fortification projects on the southern and eastern borders of Yehuda

11::13-17 – Rechavam's first three years – following God. The Kohanim and Levi'im abandon the Northern kingdom and move to the kingdom of Yehuda.

11:18-23 – Rechavam's extensive marriages

12:1 - Rechavam abandons God

12:2-4 - Shishak's invasion

12:5-8 - Rebuke of the prophet, Rechavam's remorse, and the reprieve.

12:9-11 - Shishak's plunder – the shields of Shlomo

12:12-16 - Rechavam's summary

The disparities between the accounts are significant:

1. The building projects of Rechavam that are recorded in *Divrei Ha-Yamim* are absent from *Sefer Melakhim*.

2. The extensive description of 18 wives, 60 concubines, and expansive food stores are not mentioned in *Melakhim*.

3. The entire drama of Rechavam's "strength" and "abandonment of Torah," as well as the reproach of the *navi* and Rechavam's resultant submission, are featured ONLY in *Divrei Ha-Yamim*.

4. In *Melakhim*, the invasion of Shishak and the episode of the "shields" is perceived as a calamity. In *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, it is depicted as a reprieve (see *Divrei Ha-Yamim* II 12:12)

5. *Divrei Ha-Yamim* suggests an explicit linkage between Rechavam's abandonment of *Torat Hashem* (12:1) and the advance of Shishak (12:2).

6. The interaction with the *navi* Shema'aya is absent from *Sefer Melakhim*.

How might we resolve the discrepancies between the two accounts? One method would be to see the two texts as absolutely complementary, each filling in the lacunae of the other. Indeed, that may be true. Yet, there is certainly a very different texture to each account, and we wish to probe the moral of the story, the essence or central lesson, in each book. Maybe we can explain the differences in the following manner:

**The sin that occupies *Sefer Melakhim* is idolatry.** There, we read a detailing of the *bamot*, *ashera* and *kadesh*. The resultant damage or punishment effects ONLY Jerusalem and is directed to the *Mikdash* and the royal treasury.

**In *Divrei Ha-Yamim* the sin is dramatically different.** There, **the sin is one of excessive pride**, over-confidence or self-reliance, as Rechavam becomes accustomed to the monarchy (after year 3.) The extensive building of Rechavam testifies to a monarch who has extensive resources at his

disposal. Moreover, the 18 wives and 60 concubines are reminiscent of Rechavam's father Shlomo. Rechavam is depicted in *Divrei Ha-Yamim* as a second Shlomo, who is filled with "strength," or more accurately, arrogant pride. It would appear that his defense fortifications are part of a mindset that is absolutely self-reliant rather than allowing for reliance upon the Divine. To that end, Rechavam is cautioned by the *navi*. In the end, Rechavam demonstrates humility by exhibiting submission before God, thus avoiding the absolute destruction of Jerusalem. But his fortifications prove helpless against Shishak's extensive army.

Hence, we understand why *Divrei Ha-Yamim* explains the size and composition of Shishak's forces and why the fortified cities of *Divrei Ha-Yamim* are less relevant to the idolatry of Yehuda.

The scope of the account in *Sefer Melakhim* is limited solely to the city of Jerusalem, "the city the Lord had chosen out of all the tribes of Israel to establish His name there." It is regarding the violation of the single site of worship that *Melakhim* describes the sin, and it is upon the Temple and royal treasury that the punishment is delivered.

## ARCHEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Our topic becomes even more complicated when we introduce a third source. On the southern wall of the impressive temple of Amon in Karnak, Egypt is an inscription about the military conquests of King Shishak, a Pharaoh of Libyan origin who married into the 21<sup>st</sup> dynasty of Egypt. He ruled between 935-914 BCE. The inscription describes a heavy military blow to tens of cities both in the Southern and Northern kingdoms of Israel.

Why does Shishak attack Israel? Internal evidence in *Sefer Melakhim* leads us to presume that Shishak has had his eye on Yehuda and Jerusalem for some time. After all, Shishak harbored the renegade Yerovam (11:40). We may draw upon the parallel experiences of David, who was hosted by the Philistine king, Achish when he fled from Shaul. Achish's hospitality towards the outlaw David was merely one piece of a more comprehensive strategy to weaken Shaul's kingdom.<sup>10</sup> Far from seeing Achish as a benevolent host to David, we should realize that when the right moment arrived, Achish attacked Israel, killing Shaul. Shishak's hospitality works in a similar manner. Yerovam's extended stay in Egypt gives us a window into Shishak's true intentions of attacking Yehuda as soon as Shlomo has left the scene.

In a sense, this should reframe the close ties between Shlomo and Pharaoh, that were emphasized so heavily throughout the chapters of Shlomo. Did the relationship sour, or was the closeness between Egypt and Israel in Shlomo's time merely a ploy by Pharaoh to retain some manner of control, be it in the form of an alliance? Whatever the case, with the breakup of the kingdom into two sections, Shishak seizes the opportunity and rampages through the Southern and the Northern kingdoms.

---

<sup>10</sup> *Shmuel I* chs.27,29,31.

Archeologists have been puzzled as to why Shishak would attack his friend Yerovam! If Shishak sheltered Yerovam during his years of exile, why did he attack the cities of the Northern Israelite kingdom? Professor Yehuda Elitzur<sup>11</sup> has an interesting theory in this context. He suggests that Shishak actually anticipated that Yerovam would ally with him in his attack of Yehuda! The plan was orchestrated as a joint military campaign. However, Rechavam (on prophetic advice) resisted avenging Yerovam's rebellion, and acquiesced to the split of his kingdom (see 12:22-24). After Rechavam's lack of hostility, Yerovam could hardly muster popular support for an attack on Yehuda! He had no reason or motive to attack; he was ironically beholden to Rechavam for his kingdom. And hence, Prof Elitzur suggests that Yerovam let Shishak down, abandoning their collective plan to decimate Yehuda. Yerovam refused to go to war against Yehuda. As a response, Shishak unleashed his fury against Yehuda, but failed to strike a knockout blow to the Southern kingdom. He harmed them but did not destroy them. His real fury was channeled against Yerovam's kingdom who betrayed him backtracking on previous plans.

So this explains some of the politics. But it leaves us with further problems. Why doesn't this widespread attack feature in either account? We only hear of Shishak attacking Jerusalem? Why does the Tanakh not even mention the attack to Yerovam's kingdom?

The depiction in *Sefer Melakhim* is a-historical, as if it deliberately omits the great military events and puts the entire emphasis upon the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. The most reasonable explanation to solve this problem is that the purpose of the transmission of the story is not to report historical events, however important they may be, but to teach religious lessons. (Prof. Avraham Grossman)<sup>12</sup>

It would appear that the *Tanakh* understands historical events within the context of its conception of reward and punishment. Shishak's attack on Yerushalayim is described because it punishes the nation for its idolatry and has a distinct prophetic history. Shishak's attack on Israel is not mentioned. Why? Yerovam also experienced a prophecy of destruction, that "God shall smite Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water" (14:15), but that time is not now. Yerovam's royal house will be brought down at a later point in history by the hands of King Baasha, and the Ten Tribes will be exiled many years hence. Shishak's trail of destruction is ignored because it fails to fulfill any explicit prophecy.

This omission underscores the role of *Sefer Melakhim* as a book of prophecy with its own distinct agenda. It is not a history book, but a book with a focused educational and prophetic message.

---

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.daat.ac.il/DAAT/tanach/divreya/shishak.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/tanach/rishonim/grosman4.htm>.

## **THE SPLIT OF THE KINGDOM**

That being said, there is no doubt that politically and strategically, the split of the kingdom critically weakened the nation. The split kingdom failed to deter or defend itself against Shishak. As we will read in chapters 15-16, the Northern Kingdom never succeeds in gaining momentum. Both North and South are plagued by idolatry. As we read in 14:30, the infighting within the nation is a feature of this era, and neither North nor South make much progress until that tension is resolved. We can say quite assuredly that the split of the kingdom was a huge blow for both sides. We will never know whether Yerovam and Rechavam could have cooperated or allied themselves under different conditions, yet this difficult historical period represents a significant low point.