

What the Bible says about Israel's Unfaithfulness

(From Forerunner Commentary)

Critics assert that Israel's history demonstrates the weakness of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in that their God could not keep His promises. Is that so? We need to set the record straight.

The Old Testament is a chronicle of Israel's repeated failure to obey God, of its refusal to keep His commandments and statutes. In Psalm 78:10-11, 40-42, 56-57, the psalmist mentions that Ephraim (meaning Israel at large):

Did not keep the covenant of God; they refused to walk in His law, and forgot His works and His wonders that He had shown them. . . . How often they provoked Him in the wilderness, and grieved Him in the desert! Yes, again and again they tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel. They did not remember His power. . . . Yet they tested and provoked the Most High God, and did not keep His testimonies, but turned back and acted unfaithfully like their fathers.

II Kings 17:7-8 speaks of the sins of the Kingdom of Israel, up north:

For so it was that the children of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt, . . . and they had feared other gods, and had walked in the statutes of the nations whom the LORD had cast out from before the children of Israel.

The prophet Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 32:30, quotes God's scathing indictment of the people of both Kingdoms: "[T]he children of Israel and the children of Judah have done only evil before Me from their youth."

Because of their sins, as II Kings 17:18-20 indicates, God:

Was very angry with Israel, and removed them from His sight. . . . Also Judah did not keep the commandments of the LORD their God, but walked in the statutes of Israel which they made. And the LORD rejected all the descendants of Israel, afflicted them, and delivered them into the hand of plunders, until He had cast them from His sight.

In Psalm 78:59-62, the psalmist Asaph relates that God, when He became aware of the idols of Israel,

was furious, and greatly abhorred Israel, so that He forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh, . . . and delivered His strength into captivity, and His glory into the enemy's hand. He also gave His people over to the sword, and was furious with His inheritance.

As early as the days of the founder of the Kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam I, God understood the direction Israel was taking. In I Kings 14:15, God warns that He will ultimately:

Strike Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water. He will uproot Israel from this good land which He gave to their fathers, and will scatter them beyond the [Euphrates] River, because they have made their wooden images, provoking the LORD to anger.

Much later, Amos warned Israel, "Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD are on the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth" (Amos 9:8).

The patriarchs were, as God attests again and again, faithful. However, the people of Israel failed to observe the terms of God's conditional promises to them. Israel exhibited again and again its refusal to obey God. As a result, it has yet to enter into the peace,

prosperity, and eternal possession of the land He promised the patriarchs. Hebrews 3:8-11 summarizes the matter: "In the day of trial in the wilderness, [the children of Israel] . . . tested Me, proved Me, and saw My works forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation. . . . So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'"

Because of the peoples' recalcitrance, God *withheld* His blessings, ultimately separating Himself from them by casting them out of the land He had promised the patriarchs. *God punished Israel for its disobedience by deferring the fulfillment of His promises to the patriarchs.* This deferment did not make Him unfaithful to the people, because His promises to them were conditional, based on their obedience to His revelation.

In fact, it is not perverse to assert that God was *completely* faithful to the children of Israel, doing to them exactly what He promised He would do *if* they persistently sinned against Him. At the right time and for the right people, God will honor His unconditional promises to the patriarchs. Israel's sad history is the consequence of *peoples'* faithlessness, not of their God's weakness.

Charles Whitaker