

The Story of Jeroboam

1 Kings 11–14

September 16, 2026

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Archaeological Moment: The Millo and Tell Dan

Before we open to 1 Kings, let's take a moment to set foot in the world of Jeroboam.

We meet him first as a builder. Scripture tells us that Solomon put him in charge of the forced labor over the house of Joseph, and that one of his primary projects was the construction of the Millo. The Millo — from the Hebrew word meaning “to fill” — was a massive terracing system on the eastern slope of the City of David, designed to expand the buildable surface of Jerusalem by filling in the hillside with layers of stone and earth. Archaeologists have excavated what they believe are the remains of this structure, and it is genuinely impressive. This was not a small project. It required a skilled and capable man to manage it. That is exactly how Scripture describes Jeroboam: “The man Jeroboam was very able, and when Solomon saw that the young man was industrious, he gave him charge over all the forced labor of the house of Joseph” (1 Kings 11:28).

The second site we should have in mind tonight is Tell Dan, in the far north of Israel. Excavations there have uncovered what archaeologists identify as a high place — a large stone platform with an altar — dating to the period of the divided monarchy. This is almost certainly the site where Jeroboam set up one of his two golden calves and established his northern sanctuary. The physical evidence of that false altar still exists in the ground. We will come back to Tell Dan when we reach that part of the story, because what happened there was not just a political maneuver. It was a turning point with lasting consequences for an entire nation.

With that background in place, let's land the airplane, as it were, in the day of Jeroboam.

Orientation: Two Books, One Story

We have four books in the Old Testament that cover the period of the monarchy: 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. Both sets of books tell the same basic story, but they tell it at different times, from different angles, and for different purposes — and those differences matter.

First and Second Kings were most likely written during the fall of Jerusalem around 600 BC, with some additions made after the exile. Many scholars associate this work with the prophetic tradition of Jeremiah. The central question driving these books is: *Why did the exile happen?* Because that is the question being asked, Kings is often sharply critical of the kings and their failures. It is a book written by people living through catastrophe, trying to make theological sense of it.

First and Second Chronicles, by contrast, were written after the return from exile, around 450 BC, in the era associated with Ezra. The question driving Chronicles is a different one: *Now that we are back, how do we rebuild?* As a result, Chronicles tends to omit the sins of the kings and focuses more heavily on the priests, the Temple, and the worship life of the community. It is a book written for a people who need a reason to go forward.

The structures of these books reflect their purposes. First and Second Kings flow naturally from 1 and 2 Samuel, carrying the story of the monarchy from David through the divided kingdom and into exile. Chronicles, by contrast, opens with nine chapters of genealogies stretching from Adam to the post-exilic community, and then focuses almost exclusively on the southern kingdom of Judah — because it is Judah that has returned, and it is Judah's story of worship and covenant that Chronicles wants to recover.

Kings includes the northern kings, the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, and the eventual fall of Samaria. Chronicles largely sets the north aside. The two works complement each other; they are not in competition.

With that orientation in place, let's turn to the figure at the center of tonight's study.

The Kingdom Divided

When Solomon died, the unified kingdom of Israel did not survive the transition. His son Rehoboam inherited the throne, and the northern tribes came to him with a simple request: ease the burden of forced labor his father had placed on them. Rehoboam consulted his advisors, rejected the counsel of the elders who urged moderation, and instead threatened the people with even harsher treatment. The ten northern tribes promptly broke from the house of David. From that moment forward, there were two kingdoms: the kingdom of Judah in the south, ruled by the house of David, and the kingdom of Israel in the north, which would eventually cycle through ten different royal dynasties — though only five of them were historically significant.

Each kingdom had twenty kings in all. Judah remained under a single dynasty throughout its existence. Israel did not. And the man who became the first king of that northern kingdom, the

man whose name became a byword for spiritual failure in Israel's history, was Jeroboam the son of Nebat.

Jeroboam's Beginning: A Life Launched by Grace

Jeroboam enters the story as a contractor — a skilled one. Solomon, in his great building programs, recognized Jeroboam's ability and gave him significant responsibility, including oversight of the forced labor drawn from the house of Joseph, the tribal grouping that included the powerful tribe of Ephraim.

“Jeroboam the son of Nebat, an Ephraimite of Zeredah, a servant of Solomon, whose mother's name was Zeruah, a widow, also lifted up his hand against the king. And this was the reason why he lifted up his hand against the king. Solomon built the Millo, and closed up the breach of the city of David his father. The man Jeroboam was very able, and when Solomon saw that the young man was industrious, he gave him charge over all the forced labor of the house of Joseph.” (1 Kings 11:26–28)

Something significant happened to this capable young official, however. Due to Solomon's accommodation of foreign gods — his wives had drawn him into the worship of Ashtoreth, Chemosh, and Milcom — God announced that he would remove a large portion of the kingdom from the house of David. The instrument of that removal would be Jeroboam.

The prophet Ahijah the Shilonite met Jeroboam on the road outside Jerusalem and delivered the word of the Lord through an unforgettable sign. He took hold of the new garment he was wearing, tore it into twelve pieces, and handed ten of them to Jeroboam.

“Take for yourself ten pieces, for thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Behold, I am about to tear the kingdom from the hand of Solomon and will give you ten tribes (but he shall have one tribe, for the sake of my servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem, the city that I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel), because they have forsaken me and worshiped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh the god of Moab, and Milcom the god of the Ammonites, and they have not walked in my ways, doing what is right in my sight and keeping my statutes and my rules, as David his father did. Nevertheless, I will not take the whole kingdom out of his hand, but I will make him ruler all the days of his life, for the sake of David my servant whom I chose, who kept my commandments and my statutes. But I will take the kingdom out of his son’s hand and will give it to you, ten tribes. Yet to his son I will give one tribe, that David my servant may always have a lamp before me in Jerusalem, the city where I have chosen to put my name. And I will take you, and you shall reign over all that your soul desires, and you shall be king over Israel. And if you will listen to all that I command you, and will walk in my ways, and do what is right in my eyes by keeping my statutes and my commandments, as David my servant did, I will be with you and will build you a sure house, as I built for David, and I will give Israel to you. And I will afflict the offspring of David because of this, but not forever.’” (1 Kings 11:31–39)

That is an extraordinary promise. Before Jeroboam had a throne, an army, a fortified city, or a political strategy, he had the word of God. God told him directly: I am giving you ten tribes. I will be with you. I will build you a sure house — the same kind of enduring dynasty I promised to David — if you walk in my ways.

Jeroboam did not need to invent a way to secure his future. He needed to trust the One who had already promised it. His life began with grace.

Solomon, for his part, tried to kill him. Jeroboam fled to Egypt, where he remained under the protection of Pharaoh Shishak until Solomon’s death.

The Promise Fulfilled — and the Fear That Followed

When Solomon died and Rehoboam proved himself incapable of holding the kingdom together, God’s word through Ahijah was fulfilled exactly as spoken.

“So the king did not listen to the people, for it was a turn of affairs brought about by the LORD that he might fulfill his word, which the LORD spoke by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat.” (1 Kings 12:15)

“So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day. And when all Israel heard that Jeroboam had returned, they sent and called him to the assembly and made him king over all Israel. There was none that followed the house of David but the tribe of Judah only.” (1 Kings 12:19–20)

Rehoboam attempted to reassert control by military force, but God himself intervened to stop him (1 Kings 12:21–24). Everything Ahijah had promised came to pass precisely as God had said it would.

Jeroboam then began to reign, and early on he governed well. He established his capital at Shechem, which was a symbolically significant choice — Shechem had been the first gathering place of the tribes under Joshua, and it carried deep covenantal memory. He also built Peniel. He was a capable man, and his administration had a solid beginning.

But then something changed.

“And Jeroboam said in his heart, ‘Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the LORD at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah.’” (1 Kings 12:26–27)

Notice the tragic irony. The God who gave Jeroboam the kingdom had already told him exactly how it could be established and maintained. The promise was clear: *walk in my ways, keep my commandments, and I will be with you and build you a sure house*. That was a stunning offer. But fear gripped Jeroboam, and instead of listening to what God had commanded, he turned to his counselors and did exactly the opposite.

“So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, ‘You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.’ And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan.” (1 Kings 12:28–29)

This is what fear did to Jeroboam.

He believed he had to choose between faithfulness to God and political survival. He calculated that the people’s continued pilgrimage to Jerusalem for worship would eventually pull their loyalties back toward Rehoboam, and that calculation terrified him. So he created an alternative — a religious system he could control, located in places that were geographically and politically convenient, featuring imagery drawn, almost certainly, from his years in Egypt.

Jeroboam's sin was that he treated obedience to God as a threat to the very future God had promised him. And if we believe that faithfulness will ruin us, fear has already begun to rewrite our theology.

Archaeological Moment: Tell Dan

This is where Tell Dan becomes significant. The site known today as Tell Dan, in the far north of the country near the headwaters of the Jordan River, preserves the archaeological remains of what is almost certainly Jeroboam's northern sanctuary. Excavations there have uncovered a large stone platform — a high place — along with the remains of what appears to be an altar. The site dates to the period of the divided monarchy and matches the biblical description of what Jeroboam built. You can stand on that tell today and see where the golden calf was set up, where the false priesthood offered sacrifices, where generations of Israelites came to worship in a system that looked like the worship of Yahweh but had been redesigned to serve the king's political interests.

It is sobering to stand there. The archaeological record confirms what the text records: this was a real place, a real altar, and a real apostasy with real consequences.

The Shape of the Compromise

As we read further, the full scope of what Jeroboam constructed becomes clear.

“Then this thing became a sin, for the people went as far as Dan to be before one. He also made temples on high places and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites. And Jeroboam appointed a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the feast that was in Judah, and he offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made. He went up to the altar that he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, in the month that he had devised from his own heart. And he instituted a feast for the people of Israel and went up to the altar to make offerings.” (1 Kings 12:30–33)

Notice everything Jeroboam changed. The *place* of worship — Jerusalem — was replaced by Bethel and Dan, because they were politically safer and geographically easier. The *image* — the invisible God — was now represented by golden calves that the people could see and

Jeroboam could control. The *priesthood* — God’s appointed Levites — was replaced by priests chosen from the general population according to the king’s own criteria. The *calendar* — the God-appointed feasts — was replaced by a similar celebration held on a date that Jeroboam, as the text says, “devised from his own heart.” And the *purpose* of worship was no longer ordered around God’s holiness and covenant; it was ordered around the security of Jeroboam’s throne.

Notice also the language Jeroboam used to lead the people into this counterfeit faith: “*You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough.*” It is so far. It is so demanding. Here, worship will be closer, easier, more accessible. He made false religion convenient, and convenience is always a powerful lever. He was creating a substitute faith designed to serve his kingdom, and he dressed it in the vocabulary of the Exodus — “your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” — to give it the appearance of legitimacy.

The Grace of a Warning

God did not leave Jeroboam without a word. In the very moment of his apostasy, God sent a prophet.

“And behold, a man of God came out of Judah by the word of the LORD to Bethel. Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make offerings. And the man cried against the altar by the word of the LORD and said, ‘O altar, altar, thus says the LORD: “Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name, and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who make offerings on you, and human bones shall be burned on you.”’ And he gave a sign the same day, saying, ‘This is the sign that the LORD has spoken: “Behold, the altar shall be torn down, and the ashes that are on it shall be poured out.”’” (1 Kings 13:1–3)

The prophecy was specific enough to be verified — a king named Josiah would one day desecrate this very altar — and a confirming sign was given immediately. The altar split apart and the ashes poured out, just as the prophet declared. When Jeroboam stretched out his hand and ordered the prophet seized, his hand withered and he could not draw it back. And then, when Jeroboam asked the man of God to pray for him, God restored his hand.

There is a great deal of mercy packed into that sequence of events. God sent his word. God confirmed it with a sign. God demonstrated that raising a hand against his prophet carried real consequences, and then God mercifully undid those consequences when Jeroboam cried out. The altar was false. The prophetic word was true. Repentance was still possible.

We sometimes think of God’s warnings as the opposite of grace. But in this story, the warning *is* grace. God could have allowed Jeroboam to continue undisturbed on the road toward

destruction. Instead, God interrupted him. He sent his word, exposed the false altar, demonstrated that his warning was true, withered Jeroboam's hand to show where his rebellion was leading — and then graciously restored it.

God was not merely punishing Jeroboam. He was calling him home.

But Jeroboam wanted his hand restored without having his heart changed. He wanted relief from the consequences of his sin without freedom from the sin itself. He wanted the prophet to pray for him, but he did not want to surrender to the God who answered the prayer.

That is a danger we should recognize in ourselves. We can ask God to change our circumstances without allowing God to change us. We can pray for relief from the pain, the conflict, the anxiety, the financial pressure, or the broken relationship while continuing to hold on to the pride, bitterness, dishonesty, fear, or need for control that God is actually exposing. We can want God to restore the hand while resisting his desire to restore the heart.

The Word That Cannot Be Overturned

The story of 1 Kings 13 does not end with Jeroboam. There is a second episode that is puzzling at first, but carries a warning as important as anything else in this chapter.

The man of God from Judah — the same prophet who had confronted Jeroboam — was returning home. God had given him clear instructions: do not eat or drink in Bethel, and return by a different road than the one you came. He obeyed those instructions when Jeroboam himself offered him food and a reward.

But an old prophet from Bethel rode out to meet him. When the man of God explained that God had commanded him not to eat or drink there, the old prophet replied that an angel had spoken to him with a new word from God — the man of God should come home with him and eat. The text is blunt about what followed: “*But he lied to him*” (1 Kings 13:18). The man of God accepted the invitation, went to the old prophet's house, and ate and drank. On the road home, a lion met him and killed him. The lion then stood guard over the body without harming the old prophet's donkey — itself a sign that this was an act of divine judgment, not a random event.

This story troubles our sense of justice, and it should. The man of God was deceived by a fellow prophet. The old prophet lied to him deliberately. Yet it is the man of God who died, while the old prophet survived. How are we to understand this?

The central theme of 1 Kings 13 is carried in a phrase that appears repeatedly throughout the chapter: *the word of the LORD*. The word of the Lord came against Jeroboam's altar. The altar split according to the word of the Lord. The man of God received his instructions by the word

of the Lord. Judgment was announced by the word of the Lord. And at the end of the chapter, the old prophet himself confessed that the word spoken against Bethel would certainly come true. The point the chapter is driving home, from beginning to end, is that God's word cannot be altered, negotiated, or set aside — not by a king, not by a priest, and not even by the prophet who proclaims it.

The man of God had received a plain command from God. He obeyed it when the pressure came from a king. But when the pressure came from someone who claimed spiritual authority — another prophet — he abandoned the word he had already received. He allowed a claimed new revelation to override what God had plainly said.

The old prophet was guilty of deception. But the man of God was still responsible for obeying the word God had given him. And that carries a warning that applies directly to us.

A person may appear deeply religious. He may claim to speak for God. He may invoke angels, visions, or spiritual impressions. But no supposed new revelation, no spiritual experience, no respected leader or religious authority — however impressive — has the right to contradict what God has already revealed. We test every voice against the word we have already received.

And the episode carries a direct warning for Jeroboam as well. If God held his own prophet accountable for disobeying a command he had received, Jeroboam had no reason to imagine that he could disregard God's word without consequence. The death of the man of God confirmed the very message he had preached: the judgment spoken against the altar at Bethel would certainly come.

No Repentance — and the End of the House of Jeroboam

After everything that happened — the torn altar, the withered hand, the prophetic confrontation, the divine warning confirmed by signs — the text delivers a brief and devastating verdict.

“After this thing Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way, but made priests for the high places again from among all the people. Any who would, he ordained to be priests of the high places. And this thing became sin to the house of Jeroboam, so as to cut it off and to destroy it from the face of the earth.” (1 Kings 13:33–34)

Jeroboam did not repent. Not after the torn altar. Not after his withered hand. Not after the death of the prophet on the road. He returned to the same path and continued walking it.

The final chapter of his story comes in 1 Kings 14. His son Abijah became gravely ill. Jeroboam sent his wife to consult the prophet Ahijah at Shiloh — the same prophet who had given him the promise of the kingdom all those years before — but instructed her to go in

disguise so that Ahijah would not know who she was. She brought the customary gift of bread, cakes, and honey, and set out to find the old prophet.

Ahijah was now elderly and blind. But before she arrived, God told him who was coming and why. When she reached the door, Ahijah called out to her before she could speak a word: *“Come in, wife of Jeroboam. Why do you pretend to be another?”* The disguise was useless. It had always been useless. Jeroboam had been trying to hide from God since the moment fear first took hold of him, and God had always seen clearly.

Ahijah then delivered the word of the Lord. He reminded her of what God had done for Jeroboam — raised him from among the people, made him king, torn the kingdom away from the house of David and given it to him. And then he announced what Jeroboam’s response had been: not faithfulness, but idolatry. Jeroboam had made other gods and cast metal images and turned his back on the Lord entirely. Therefore, God would remove his household from the earth. Every male in his line would be cut off. Those who died in the city would be consumed by dogs; those who died in the open country by birds. The only mercy was reserved for the child Abijah — because, alone in Jeroboam’s house, the Lord had found something in him that was pleasing.

Ahijah also announced that the consequences of Jeroboam’s sin would extend beyond his own household. Because he had led an entire nation into idolatry, God would one day shake Israel like a reed in the water, uproot the people from the land, and scatter them beyond the Euphrates. The fall of the northern kingdom, which came in 722 BC, was already being announced in the reign of its first king.

When Jeroboam’s wife crossed the threshold of her home in Tirzah, the child died, exactly as the word of the Lord had spoken.

The first dynasty of Israel was over. The prophet who had announced the beginning announced the end. And the same word that had been spoken in grace was now being spoken in judgment, because the one who received it had never truly received it at all.

The King We Need

Jeroboam’s story began with grace. God found him while he was still a servant, raised him up, gave him a kingdom, and promised to build him a sure house. He did not need to create his own future. He needed to trust the God who had already promised it.

But fear convinced him that obedience was dangerous.

To protect his throne, Jeroboam built golden calves. He changed the place of worship, the priesthood, the calendar, and the purpose of worship itself. He surrounded himself with religion — but it was a religion designed to keep him in control, not to keep him near to God.

And God called him back, repeatedly and patiently. God sent a prophet. God split the altar. God withered Jeroboam's hand and then mercifully restored it. God demonstrated that his word was true and his judgment was certain. Yet Jeroboam wanted his hand restored without having his heart changed. He experienced the kindness of God without allowing that kindness to lead him to repentance.

In the end, everything Jeroboam tried to preserve through fear was lost. He feared losing his kingdom, but his dynasty was destroyed. He feared losing control of the people, but his sin helped carry the entire nation toward exile. What he attempted to secure through compromise could only have been secured through trust.

So the question this story places before us is not merely, *What did Jeroboam do wrong?*

The question is: Where is fear rewriting our faith? Where are we treating obedience to God as a threat? Where are we calling compromise practical? Where are we asking God to support the life we have chosen rather than surrendering to the life to which he has called us? Where do we want God to change our circumstances without allowing him to change our hearts?

And there is one more thing. Jeroboam's failure makes us long for a better king. Jesus did not use worship to protect his throne. He left the glory of heaven and gave himself for his people. Jeroboam led his people away from God; Jesus died to bring us to God. Jeroboam brought judgment upon his household; Jesus took the judgment of his household upon himself. Jeroboam's kingdom could not endure, but the kingdom of Jesus will never end.

The answer to fear is not greater control. The answer is trust in the true King.

We do not need to hide behind a disguise. We do not need to build an altar we can manage, or rewrite God's word to make it less demanding, or construct a faith that asks nothing of us while promising us everything. We can come honestly to Jesus, confess our fear and sin, receive his mercy, and follow him.

Jeroboam heard God's voice repeatedly and hardened his heart. May we respond differently.

| “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” (Hebrews 3:15)

While God is speaking, there is still time to turn. While his mercy is being offered, there is still time to receive it. Let us tear down the false altars, release what we are trying to control, and follow Jesus Christ — the faithful Prophet, the true King, and the Savior who brings us home to God.