The Success and Failure of Ancient Israel—and the Mission of Elijah!

This assignment will consist of two parts: (1) the national covenant made by Israel as the entered into the promised land; and (2) a reading by Elder James E. Talmage (1862-1933) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Elder Talmage’s reading is about the scattering of Israel.

1. A National Covenant Made at Shechem

A. A Theocratic Government Was Established Under the Law of Moses

Joseph Smith (1805-44) President

When the of Israel were chosen with Moses at their head, they were to be a peculiar people, among whom God should place His name; their motto was: "The Lord is our lawgiver; the Lord is our Judge; the Lord is our King; and He shall reign over us." While in this state they might truly say, "Happy is that people, whose God is the Lord." Their government was a theocracy; they had God to make their laws, and men chosen by Him to administer them; He was their God, and they were His people. Moses received the word of the Lord from God Himself; He was the mouth of God to Aaron, and Aaron taught the people, in both civil and ecclesiastical affairs; they were both one, there was no distinction; so will it be when the purposes of God shall be accomplished, when "the Lord shall be King over the whole earth" and "Jerusalem His throne." "The law shall go forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith [1974], p. 252; emphasis added)

Except that both were a theocratic form of government, we are not sure how similar or dissimilar the government established under the law of Moses was from that of the patriarchal government the Lord employed from Adam to the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We do know from the various teachings found in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy that this government included God as their King, the priests and Levites to teach law and perform the priesthood ordinances, and tribal and local leaders—called, elders, judges, and princes—to administer the laws, judgments, and statutes of the law of Moses. Also, the Lord would send prophets to warn Israel when they were departing from the truth or to give further guidance as necessary.

For this form of government to work, Israel must respond properly; they must obey the laws given by God to Israel. To this end, God desired that the children of Israel enter into a covenant arrangement wherein Israel would covenant to keep the laws of Jehovah.

B. The National Covenant at Shechem

Joshua, who had been a faithful leader from the time of Israel’s exodus from Egypt, was ordained by Moses to take over guiding Israel into the promised land. The first Canaanite cities the Israelites conquered were the strategic sites of Jericho and Ai (Joshua 1-8). These guarded the entrance way into the heart of the promised land.

After the conquering of Jericho and Ai and before proceeding to conquer more of the land, Joshua led the children of Israel to Shechem (Ex. 8:30-35) where God had first told Abraham that the land of Canaan was the land promised to his posterity (Gen. 12:6-7). While there, Joshua fulfilled a command given by Moses in his final discourse (see Deut. 27-28). Moses wanted Israel to go to the very place where the promised land was first revealed and enter there into a covenant with God that they would remain faithful to Him and the law. In so doing, they would secure the Lord’s help in conquering the land of Canaan.

Shechem was situated between two mountains, Mt. Ebal on the north and Mt. Gerizim on the south. Moses charged Israel that once they arrived at Shechem, they were to set up the Ark of the Covenant between the two mountains (Joshua 8:33). Upon large stones, the law of Moses was to be written in the presence of the children of Israel (Deut. 27:1-8; Joshua 8:32). The law was then to be read to all the Israelites (Joshua 8:33). This was to be followed by the Israelites renewing their covenant that they would honor the law of Moses.

As part of the covenant renewal, six of the tribes of Israel were to climb up the side of Mt. Gerizim while the other six were to ascend Mt. Ebal (Deut. 27:11-13). The six tribes on Mt. Gerizim would shout out all the blessings that Israel would receive if they were obedient to the law (see Deut. 28:1-14). These included blessings over their cities, fields, crops and the blessing of rain for water. They were also promised that the land would remain theirs and that the Lord would fight their enemies for them.

The other six tribes would then pronounce the curses (see Deut. 28:15-68) that would result if they were disobedient to the covenant including the loss of their cities, fields, crops and rain. When their enemies would attack, the Lord would not fight their battles.

The ultimate curse Israel was to experience if they broke the covenant would be the loss of the promised land. The Lord promised that he would be scatter Israel among the gentiles “from the one end of the earth even unto the other.” Israel would live amongst the gentiles and serve their gods. In this condition, Israel would continue to wander among these nations (Deut. 28:64-68). As the prophet Amos would later prophesy, after the Lord sits in “the house of Israel among all nations” (Amos 9:9) they would “wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it” (Amos 8:12).

The significance of this sacred setting is enhanced when the proper orientation of the ancient Hebrew map is understood. Instead of north being the primary direction for orientation as in western societies, east (the direction of the rising sun) was the primary direction. Therefore, south is on the right hand of the map while north is on the left. A Hebrew word for south is yamin, or right hand. This is also the Hebrew word for blessing. A Hebrew word for north is...
2. The Failure, the Success, and Failure Israel

A. The Period of the Judges

After renewing the covenant at Shechem, each tribe of Israel continued taking over the land. The book of Judges records the events of the next few hundred years. During this time, Israel struggled in keeping their covenant. The continually struggled with the paganism of the Canaanites. They would adopted Canaanite fertility cult practices. When this happened, the Lord would allow enemies to bring Israel into servitude. When Israel was humbled, the Lord would raise up a ruler—to refer to as a judge—who would lead Israel to freedom from their enemy.

B. The United Monarchy

Samuel. Towards the end of the period of the Judges, the Lord raised a righteous man who became both high priest and chief judge of the people. His name was Samuel (see 1 Samuel 1-7). He led Israel into giving up polytheism for a period of time. However, towards the end of his life, the children of Israel to have a king that would be able to lead them in fighting their enemies (1 Sam. 8). The Lord gave in to Israel’s request.

King Saul. The first king of Israel was named Saul. He was able to loosely unite the twelve tribes of Israel. However, he faltered and became disobedient. He was eventually killed in a battle against Israel’s main enemy, the Philistines (see 1 Sam. 9-31).

King David. The Lord then called David to become king of Israel. He was able to unite the twelve tribes into a nation. He conquered the Jebusite city of Jerusalem and made it the capital of united Israel. During his reign, David was able to conquer Israel’s enemies, making Israel a free nation (see 2 Samuel).

King Solomon. David’s son, Solomon, succeeded David as King of Israel. It was during his reign when Israel nearly succeeded in blessing all nations of the world. Solomon built a temple to Jehovah (1 Kings 5-8). The Lord blessed Solomon for his righteousness. He gave him great wisdom. Through Solomon’s administration, Israel became an empire. The surrounding nations began to take great notice in Israel and who the Israelites were. The famed queen of Sheba “heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord” and decided to make a personal visit to see who the people of Jehovah were. She was greatly impressed with Solomon and his people (see 1 Kings 10). Finally, Israel was becoming the nation the Lord had promised Abraham.

However, Solomon faltered and began to worship false gods. His people, of course, followed suit. Israel lost the blessings they could have continued to have (see 1 Kings 11).

3. The Division of the Kingdom and the Scattering of Israel and Judah

After the death of Solomon, the twelve tribes of Israel divided into two separate countries: the ten tribes in the north became Israel and two tribes in the south became Judah. Elder James E. Talmage 1862-1933) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles discusses what happens to these two nations in the article below. As you read it, summarize the main story line in your write up.

We believe in the literal gathering of Israel, and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes, etc. (Articles of Faith, No. 10).

The gathering of Israel is contingent upon the fact of that people’s dispersion. Consideration of the scattering is a necessary preliminary to a study of the reassembling of Israel’s hosts.

God made covenant with Abraham that through him and his posterity should all nations of the earth be blessed. A rich fulfilment of the promise is found in the earthly birth of the Christ through the lineage of Abraham. Further and related fulfilment appears in the effect of the distribution of Israelites amongst other nations through enforced dispersion.

Abraham’s descendants through his son Isaac and grandson Jacob have been distinctively known since Jacob’s time as Israelites, or the Children of Israel. As the Old Testament avouches they grew to be a mighty nation, distinguished in certain respects from all other peoples. They were particularly characterized as “Jehovah worshipers,” professing allegiance to the living God, whilst all the rest of the world was pagan and idolatrous. By their world wide dispersion a knowledge of the true and living God has been diffused.

So long as the Israelites were true to the Divine covenants made with Abraham, and reaffirmed severally with Isaac and Jacob, they prospered in material things as in spiritual power. So far as they became alienated through pagan practices and unrighteous affiliations, they suffered both individually and as a nation.

The Lord set before them the alternative of blessed perpetuity incident to their faithfulness, or disruption and subjugation to
alien powers as the sure result of disobedience to Divine requirement. Both sacred and secular history make plain that Israel chose the evil part, forfeiting the promised blessings, reaping the foretold curses.

At the death of Solomon the nation was divided. Approximately two of the twelve tribes became established as the Kingdom of Judah, and came in time to be currently known as Jews; the rest of the tribes retained the title Kingdom of Israel, though known also by the name of Ephraim. The division led eventually to the eclipse of both kingdoms as autonomous powers among the known nations of the earth.

The Kingdom of Israel was subdued by the Assyrians about 721 B.C.; the people were carried into captivity, and later disappeared so completely from history as to be designated the Lost Tribes. These are the ten tribes whose restoration is predicted as an event of latter times. The Kingdom of Judah maintained a precarious and partial independence for a little more than a century after the Assyrian captivity, and then fell a prey to the conquering hosts of Nebuchadnezzar. After seventy years of bondage, the period specified through prophecy by Jeremiah (25:11, 12; 29:10), a considerable number of the people were permitted to return to Judea, where they rebuilt the temple, and vainly strove to reestablish themselves on the scale of their vanished greatness. They were impoverished by the aggressions of Syria and Egypt, and eventually became tributary to Rome, in which condition of vassalage they existed at the time of Christ's earthly ministry amongst them.

From the numerous Biblical prophecies relating to Israel's dispersion the following are cited as particularly illustrative:

"And the Lord shall scatter you among the nations, and ye shall be left few in number among the heathen, whither the Lord shall lead you." (Deut. 4:27)

"And I will scatter thee among the heathen, and disperse thee in the countries, and will consume thy filthiness out of thee." (Ezek. 22:15)

"For, lo, I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth." (Amos 9:9)

"And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled." (Luke 21:24)

And so, in progressive stages, the covenant people of God have been scattered. The bringing of a body of Israelites to the Western Continent six centuries before the birth of Christ, of which the Book of Mormon bears record, was part of the general dispersion, and was so recognized by Nephite prophets.

Since the destruction of Jerusalem and the final disruption of the Jewish nation by the Romans, A. D. 71, the Jews have been largely wanderers upon the face of the earth, outcasts among the nations, a people without a country, a nation without a home. Israel has been sifted "like as corn is sifted in a sieve"; but, be it remembered that coupled with the dread prediction was the assuring promise "Yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth."

The record made by that division of the house of Israel which took its departure from Jerusalem, and made its way to the Western Hemisphere about 600 B.C., contains many references to the dispersions that had already taken place, and to the continuation of the scattering which was to the writers of the Book of Mormon yet future. In the course of the journey to the coast, the prophet Lehi, while encamped with his family and other followers in the valley of Lemuel on the borders of the Red Sea, declared what he had learned by revelation of the future "dwindling of the Jews in unbelief," of their crucifying the Messiah, and of their scattering "upon all the face of the earth." He compared Israel to an olive tree, the branches of which were to be broken off and distributed; and he recognized the exodus of his colony, and their journeying afar, as an incident in the general plan of dispersion.

Nephi, the son of Lehi, also beheld in vision the scattering of the covenant people of God, and on this point added his testimony to that of his prophet-father. He saw also that the seed of his brethren, subsequently known as the Lamanites, were to be chastened for their unbelief, and that they were destined to become subject to the Gentiles, and to be scattered before them. Down the prophetic vista of years, he saw also the bringing forth of sacred records, other than those then known, "unto the convincing of the Gentiles, and the remnant of the seed of my brethren, and also the Jews who were scattered upon all the face of the earth."

After their arrival on the promised land, the colony led by Lehi received further information regarding the dispersion of Israel. The prophet Zenos, quoted by Nephi, had predicted the unbelief of the house of Israel, in consequence of which these covenant ones of God were to "wander in the flesh, and perish, and become a hiss and a by-word, and be hated among all nations."

The brothers of Nephi, skeptical in regard to these teachings, asked whether the things of which he spake were to come to pass in a spiritual sense, or more literally; and were informed that "the house of Israel, sooner or later, will be scattered upon all the face of the earth, and also among all nations"; and further, in reference to dispersions then already accomplished, that "the more part of all the tribes have been led away; and they are scattered to and fro upon the isles of the sea"; and then, by way of prediction concerning further division and separation, Nephi adds that the Gentiles shall be given power over the people of Israel, "and by them shall our seed be scattered."

The day of deliverance for Israel is near at hand; the restoration of the ancient Kingdom of Judah, and of the remnants of all the tribes distributed throughout the earth, as well as bringing forth from their long exile the tribes that have been lost, are particularly specified as events of the current dispensation, directly precedent to the second advent of the Christ. (From The Vitality of Mormonism [1919], pp. 161-165)