Zeitschrift: Judaica : Beiträge zum Verstehen des Judentums

Herausgeber: Zürcher Institut für interreligiösen Dialog

Band: 71 (2015)

Artikel: Limited and unlimited monarchy : Malbim's interpretation of the division of the kingdom narrative (1 Kgs 12:1-24)

Autor: Frisch, Amos

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-961689

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Mehr erfahren

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. En savoir plus

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. Find out more

Download PDF: 16.10.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, https://www.e-periodica.ch

Limited and Unlimited Monarchy: Malbim's Interpretation of the Division of the Kingdom Narrative (1 Kgs 12:1–24)

By *Amos Frisch**

Abstract

The article focuses on the commentary by R. Meir Leibush Malbim (1809–1879) on one story – the division of the kingdom after the death of Solomon.

An important element of his commentary is the distinction between two types of monarchy – limited constitutional monarchy and absolute monarchy. For Malbim, this distinction is the hinge of plot. The article analyses his reading of the story and traces his attitude to these two contraries. Basing his commentary on this single fundamental principle heightens the story's unity. This is further enhanced by his deep understanding of the meaning of various phrases in the text. Both features of his commentary serve his purpose of revealing the beauty and grandeur of the biblical narrative that are a corollary of its holiness.

The last part of the article considers Malbim's evaluation of the characters. Despite the initial impression, he expresses greater identification with Jeroboam and his supporters than with Rehoboam. This identification reflects his social sensitivities and in fact does not run counter to the judgment of the biblical narrator.

In this article, I would like to discuss several hallmarks of the exegetical method of *Malbim*, i.e. R. Me'ir Leibush (Loeb) b. Jehiel Michel Wisser (Voločisk/Volhynia 1809–1879 Kiev). Instead of offering examples drawn at random from all over the TaNa"Kh, I will focus on a single story: the division of the kingdom after Solomon's death.

This method means that I cannot choose only the examples that are most compatible with my thesis and ignore others, but must deal with everything that appears in his text. My experience is that when you focus on a single story and probe its depths you are apt to come up with new and illuminating insights that escaped you at first reading, when you were concentrating on amassing more and more examples. You also acquire a fuller picture, which is often complex and multifaceted, and as such, a more accurate reflection of what the commentator has to offer. In addition, this

---

* Prof. *Amos Frisch*, Department of Bible, Bar-Ilan University, IL-5290002, Israel. – This is a revised and expanded version of a paper read at the Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting 2014 in Vienna, July 9, 2014.

method allows readers to understand a biblical story in light of the running commentary on it. Of course, every choice has its price – here, the limitation to a single narrative – but I consider this price worthwhile. In any case, it can be repaid by means of further studies of other texts, which can then be compared and integrated – but only after the close reading of a single story.[1]

In an earlier study on Malbim, which focused on his commentary on 1 Samuel 8, I dealt with two pairs of contrasts he identified there.[2] One of them is that between two types of monarchy – limited constitutional monarchy and absolute monarchy.[3] The same contrast plays a prominent role in Malbim's reading of the story of the division of the kingdom. However, there is a significant difference in how this antithetical pair fits into these two stories. In the narrative of the establishment of the kingdom, in 1 Samuel 8, the distinction blends naturally into the plot: the people demand a king, Samuel demurs, and the Lord permits. The difference between two forms of monarchy can explain the gap between Samuel's negative response and the Lord's consent: Samuel is opposed to *absolute* monarchy; the Lord approves a *constitutional* monarchy. In the account of the division of the kingdom, by contrast, this distinction would seem to be irrelevant: the story revolves around the people's request for an easing of their burden – the corvée and perhaps taxes; but there does not seem to be any debate about the nature of the regime. Nevertheless, Malbim unexpectedly brings up this contrast as the key to understanding the plot and refers to it repeatedly as the story proceeds.

---

1 For an analysis of this method, see now AMOS FRISCH, "From Distinguishing between Synonyms to Revealing the Coherence of the Literary Unit: On the Interpretive Method of *Malbim,*" in: *Judaica* 69 (2013), pp. 393–429. In the body of that article Malbim's commentaries on Gen. 4:1–16, Hosea 14, and Psalm 89 are discussed. Biographical details about Malbim are presented there.

2 A paper read at the Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting 2013 (St. Andrews, July 10, 2013), but not yet published

3 Yitzhaq b. Yehuda Abravanel (Lisbon 1437–1508 Venice) mentions this distinction as having been noted by the apostate Paul of Burgos (originally Shelomo ha-Levi; Burgos 1351–1435 Burgos) as one explanation for the opposition to the establishment of the monarchy, despite the explicit permission for this in Deuteronomy 17; but Abravanel rejects the idea. Malbim included a major treatment of the two forms of monarchy in the introduction to one of his earliest works, the commentary on Esther (מגילת אסתר... ונלווה עליו באור חדש [Breslau, 1845]). For an analysis of his approach, see ORI BAGNO, "לגיון של מלך מסיני": האזרח, העם והחברה הבין-לאומית במשנתו המדינית של המלבי"ם (תקס"ט-תר"מ), Ph.D. dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 2013, pp. 132–134.

I would like to suggest that Malbim takes the difference between the two forms of government to be the central axis of the plot[4] and attaches additional circles to it as a function of the literary aspect under discussion. In this study, instead of addressing individual features of Malbim's exegesis, I will take them up in the order they appear in the commentary, interwoven with the central thread of the distinction between the two types of monarchy.

Malbim first introduces the distinction in his comment on verse 4:

As is known, there are two kinds of kingdoms. (1) There are limited monarchies, in which the king cannot act without the consent of the people and their representatives and must comply with the law of the land; nor can he burden them with labour and taxes without their agreement. (2) There are also absolute monarchies, in which the king rules alone as he sees fit and can burden them with labour and taxes as he wishes, without asking their opinion, because they are all his slaves. He can compel them to work for him by increasing the yoke, that is, by imposing harsh punishments on those who disobey him.

Note that this initial presentation already emphasizes two important elements of what he will emphasize later: forced labour, on the one hand, and the yoke, on the other.

This theoretical introduction of the two concepts is followed by a historical reconstruction. According to Malbim, David ruled as a constitutional monarch.[5] However, when Solomon inherited the throne he set himself up as an absolute ruler. After his death, the people's representatives conditioned their acceptance of Rehoboam as king on restoration of the constitutional regime.

Here Malbim employs one of his characteristic methods and seizes on the difference between ostensible synonyms.[6] In their petition, recounted in v. 4, the people link the yoke and the corvée: "Your father made our yoke heavy. Now lighten the harsh labour and the heavy yoke which your father laid on us, and we will serve you."[7] However, Malbim notes an interesting

---

4 We may compare this to his approach in his commentary on Esther, where the definition of the nature of Ahasuerus' regime is a central motif. See BAGNO, "לגיון של מלך" (see note 3 above), pp. 134–136.

5 This assertion is more than plausible, given the way in which David was elected king over all Israel – a request by the representatives of the northern tribes and a compact with them, as recounted in 2 Samuel 5:1–3.

6 On the distinction between synonyms in Malbim's biblical commentaries, see now HALLEL ESHKOLI, הסינונימיה בלשון המקרא על פי שיטת מלבים (בדיקה ביקורתית של שיטתו הסמנטית בתחום הסינונימיה), Ph.D. dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 2009.

7 On the link between "yoke" and "labour," see Gen. 27:40; Lev. 26:13; Deut. 21:3, 28:48; Jer. 2:20 (*kethib*), 27:8,11,12, 28:14, 30:8; Ezek. 34:27.

stylistic phenomenon; namely, that their juxtaposition in the verse refers exclusively to the future; when the people describe the situation under Solomon they refer only to the yoke. The same is true in the people's representations later in the story as well (vv. 9 and 10).

One of Malbim's questions addresses this difference (on v. 4):

Why did they begin only with the yoke, and conclude with both the forced labor and the yoke, when they should have said, "your father made our yoke heavy and piled on our labour"?

Here, by creating an artificial distinction between the yoke and the corvée, he adheres to his method of distinguishing ostensible synonyms in order to explain the difference between the two parts of the people's request of the young king. He understands עֲבֹדָה as meaning "forced labour," but attaches an unusual sense to the word עֹל (*lit.* "yoke"): "He can compel them to work for him by increasing the yoke, that is, by imposing harsh punishments on those who disobey him." In other words, here "yoke" designates the criminal sanctions the king applies to those who defy his will and serves as a metonym for absolute monarchy. The sense of the word is made more explicit in the last part of his comment on verse 9:

He said, "This people who have said to me, 'lighten the yoke. …' " In other words, he is asking for their advice about the fact that people want a milder yoke, that is, a limited monarchy.

We are to understand that the people's petition to Rehoboam has two parts and that the second adds to the first and is in fact the more important. Their first demand is that he reduce their quota of forced labour. This is a specific request about an insupportable burden. Nevertheless, to this they attach a more basic and broader request – a lightening of the "yoke": in other words, that he reign as a limited monarch subject to the consent of the people's representatives and the law of the land.

Malbim reads the subordinate clause "which your father laid on us" not as adjectival but (as the Midrash does on occasion)[8] as causal: "Lighten the harsh labour and the heavy yoke *because* your father laid it on us (illegitimately)." The people's representatives assert that Solomon had no legal or

---

8 See Rashi's formulation of the idea expressed in the rabbinic literature (B *Bava Qama* 93a et passim), which reads the verse, "Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents" (Gen. 13:5) as "Lot, *because* he went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tent" (so too in Moshe Alsheikh's commentary on the verse). See: YITZHAK HEINEMANN, דרכי האגדה, 3rd ed. (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 136; NECHAMA LEIBOWITZ and Moshe Ahrend, פירוש רש"י לתורה: עיונים בשיטתו (Tel Aviv, 1990), vol. 1, pp. 94–97.

moral basis for altering the form of government; but during his reign there was no way they could restore the constitutional regime. Now, however, that his son is inheriting the throne, the people demand that the original form of monarchy be reinstituted. When read this way, their petition is not only a request for a reduction in their taxes and forced labour, but also, and mainly, a legal and constitutional argument. The insertion of this concept into their speech does not merely expand and deepen its content; it also heightens the reader's identification with the people's position.

Malbim's basic exposition of the two type of monarchy is found here, in his remarks on verse 4; but even earlier, in his discussion of v. 1, Malbim addressed the two different conceptions of monarchy as they apply to a prince who inherits the throne from his father. He believes that, as a matter of law, the sceptre passed automatically to Rehoboam upon Solomon's death and there was no need for popular consent to his accession. He learns this from the phrase that concludes the history of Solomon: "and Rehoboam his son was king in his stead" (1 Kings 11:43), as well as from the statement by the Talmudic sages (B *Horayot* 11b and B *Keritot* 5a) that the son of a king does not need to be anointed to succeed to the throne.[9]

However, the Israelites declared that they did not recognize Rehoboam's succession and would do so only after he met with them and negotiated the terms of his rule. On first reading, the verse may seem to reflect a placid situation: "Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king" (12:1). It fact, it conceals a fundamental disagreement about how a king is to be chosen.

For modern readers, the conflicting theories of royal succession do not correspond to the difference between absolute monarchy and constitutional monarchy.[10] Malbim, though, does seem to equate whether the king's actions require popular consent with whether his accession to the throne requires popular ratification.[11]

---

9 Malbim understands this to obviate not just anointing but also a formal coronation ceremony.

10 A king who inherits the throne, with no need for confirmation by the people, may nevertheless be a constitutional monarch. The opposite, too, is conceivable: a king may be chosen by popular assent to wield absolute power.

11 Note the use of the word "conditions" in both cases: "He was not yet king until they voluntarily enthroned him and until he fulfilled the conditions they would stipulate" (comm. on v. 1); "your answer should be that you are their servant, so they will not present additional conditions and laws" (on v. 7). At the start of his commentary on Esther, where he expounds his position on the two types of monarchy (see above, n. 4), he explicitly connects the type of regime with

It is in the context of Rehoboam's consultation with the elders that the narrator first refers to him as "the king" (v. 6). The Bible commentator and rabbi of Safed, Moshe Alsheikh (16th century), explained this as a reflecting an objective situation – Rehoboam's conduct. It is standard procedure for kings to seek advice: "In this he was employing the strategy of kings, who consult with the elders." Malbim, by contrast, sees the reference to "the king" as reflecting Rehoboam's subjective mental state: he views himself as an absolute monarch who does not require popular confirmation of his status, and it is as such that he consults with the elders. Malbim's basic position on absolute monarchy helps him explain the term applied to the character.[12]

When he consults the elders, Rehoboam asks, "*How* do you advise me to answer this people?" (v. 6). However, his parallel query to the young men is, "*What* do you advise that we answer this people?" (v. 9). Continuing his practice of close reading, Malbim points out this change from "how" to "what" – which Yitzhaq Abravanel had already noted.[13] According to Malbim, Rehoboam believed that he was an absolute ruler and not required to grant the people's request. His mind is already made up and he is consulting only about the "how" of it that is, the style and manner in which to phrase his rejection of the people's petition.

The elders' response is that of experienced counsellors who are trying to find a way to satisfy the king's desire to keep a firm grip on the reins of absolute power. Malbim takes their proposal as the golden mean between an explicit rejection and agreeing to negotiate the details of the people's request. A blanket rejection would spark a revolt; but even if negotiations would preserve his power, they would erode his authority and status somewhat and impose constitutional limits on what he may do.

---

how the ruler attains the throne. In a limited monarchy, there is "usually a king who is nominated by the people's choice, and when they elect him they enact the royal statute applying to him, just how far his power and rule extend. And usually such a king takes an oath when crowned to adhere to the laws and statutes of the state."

12 We must allow that inasmuch as Malbim understands "king" to reflect Rehoboam's subjective perception, it is not clear what change has occurred in him so that this verse refers to him as "king."

13 Some modern versions of the Biblical text preserve the difference; e.g., Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, "Wie ratet ihr" and "Was ratet ihr"; AV and RSV (quoted in the text). Others, though, translate more freely and lose this distinction, which seems to have a solid basis (Hebrew אֵיךְ in the first case, מָה in the second): e.g. NAB, which has the identical text in both verses ("What answer do you advise me to give this people").

The elders' magic solution is a sweeping declaration that will dazzle the people and mislead them to think they do not have to haggle over the particulars. Malbim understands "If you will be a servant to this people today" (v. 7) as part of the speech, they are advising him to make:

He should promise them more than they want; that is, he should answer that the people are not his slaves and that, instead, he is the people's servant and must do what they want, in a way that makes their request seem to be a slight matter and something required by common sense.

They will then acclaim Rehoboam king, after which he will be able to wield absolute power, unfettered by legal restrictions. In this reading, the elders have no interest in justice and are not even particularly honourable, given that their advice is to hoodwink the people. Their goal is to ensure that Rehoboam can rule as he wishes.

We have seen how he handled v. 4, reading the subordinate clause there as stating the cause of the action. He follows a similar procedure with v. 8 ("But he forsook the counsel which the old men gave him, and took counsel with the young men who had grown up with him and stood before him"), reading a deeper meaning into the statement than is usually found there and showing that there is no surplus verbiage in the text. "That the elders gave him" is not a relative clause, but a statement of the cause for Rehoboam's action. Alternatively, in Malbim's paraphrase, "because their counsel was a *new* idea." That is, Rehoboam rejected the elders' advice because it was not what he was looking for. He wanted to know: *how* to answer the people, but hears the elders telling him *what* to do.

Next Rehoboam consults with the young men. According to Malbim, not only is their portrayal in v. 8 objectively true, it also highlights Rehoboam's reasons for conferring with them. They are "the young men who had grown up with him and stood before him." Here Malbim discerns two reasons why the king turns to them: First, they had grown up with him and can be expected to respect his opinion and wishes.[14] Second, "they stood before him" – that is, they enjoy some of the perquisites of his power, so any concessions they propose would affect them, too, and detract from their privileges. This is why Rehoboam can assume that "they will look for stratagems to retain the unlimited monarchy, in order to benefit themselves."[15]

---

14 One could also assert the contrary. Malbim's reason for Rehoboam's displeasure with the elders – "he thought that the elders were arrogant to offer him advice that ran counter to his will" – could equally apply to the young men, his childhood friends and boon companions.

15 Even though Malbim does not say so explicitly, we may infer that he believes

When he reports their answer, the narrator emphasizes only that they "had grown up with him." Malbim understands this as conveying the narrator's evaluation of their action: they do not behave like counsellors – "those who stand before him," as they are designated in v. 8 – who will offer the king the best and most judicious advice. They are merely the boys who grew up with him – callow and inexperienced youngsters of his own generation. Note that Malbim takes the description of the young men in v. 10 not as Rehoboam's subjective point of view and as the reason he turned to them (as he reads v. 8), but as the narrator's critical evaluation of their answer. We might fault Malbim for inconsistency here, but it is precisely the change of perspective that allows him to explain the truncated repetition.[16]

The young men's response in vv. 10 and 11 inverts the comparison between father and son: the people are expecting a lightening of their burden, but the young men counsel that he redouble it. They usually are assumed to be motivated by arrogance or by a desire to impose harsh control of the people, but Malbim relocates their advice to the legal plane: Solomon had arrogated to himself the power and privilege to alter the form of government from constitutional to absolute monarchy. Rehoboam, by contrast, is not seeking to innovate, but only to preserve his father's prerogatives. If the people obeyed Solomon and accepted his revolution, they should certainly obey Rehoboam, who is merely continuing the status quo.

In v. 13, the narrator prefaces Rehoboam's answer to the people with his own perception of its tone: "The king answered the people harshly and forsook the counsel which the old men had given him." Here Malbim asks two questions that reflect his sensitivity to stylistic details: First, why the repetition of "forsook the counsel which the old men had given him," already stated in v. 8? Second, how should we understand the order of the clauses? Would not "the king forsook the counsel which the old men had given him and answered the people harshly" be more logical? Malbim's answer is that the difference between the advices proffered by the veteran

---

that the elders had been dismissed from their official posts when Rehoboam acceded to the throne and that he consulted with them only because of their experience in Solomon's absolute monarchy. Hence the second consideration, too (and not just the first, related to age) is irrelevant to them.

16 The assignment of expressive weight to the phrase, "the young men who had grown up with him," may rest on the fact that it appears in both vv. 8 and 10, whereas the parallel verse about the elder's response (v. 7) does not recapitulate, even in part, the description in v. 6, "who had stood before Solomon his father while he was yet alive."

counsellors and by the young bloods is purely a matter of the best tactic to achieve Rehoboam's goal of absolute control (a gentle answer or a harsh and intimidating response). Malbim hears the young men's answer as a proclamation of the continuation of the yoke and persistence of the *ancien régime*. Given that the elders' suggestion sought the same goal, it is not the content of Rehoboam's reply that departs from their advice, but only the style, the harsh tone and unpleasant words instead of an attempt at appeasement. The verb "forsook" does not recapitulate or parallel the first part of the sentence; instead, it refers to the point at which Rehoboam abandoned the elders' advice by answering *harshly*. That is, the narrator first said "answered harshly" and then "forsook," because it was only when the king spoke harshly that he could be said to have ignored the elders' counsel.

The rupture is not final, however, and can still be retrieved, if, despite his harsh tone, Rehoboam yields on the question of the nature of his regime. The final blow is his dispatch of Adoram, the royal officer in charge of the hated corvée, to the people (v. 18). Malbim does not hold back in his judgment of this act:

> He foolishly sent Adoram, who was in charge of the corvée under Solomon, and whom the people loathed for the burden of that service. He sent him to collect the taxes to show that he intended to take it from them with a heavy hand, as before.[17]

It is only then that the Israelites put an end to the uncertain political situation in which they placed themselves when they deposed Rehoboam without appointing a new ruler, and summon Jeroboam and crown him king.

In passing, Malbim also voices his assessment of the characters, which seems to become more pronounced as the plot moves forward. From his comment on v. 1, we can infer that he is critical of the northern tribes, inasmuch as he states that whereas Rehoboam inherited the throne from his father, "Israel was looking for an excuse and came to proclaim him king. In this way they informed him that he was not yet king until they voluntarily enthroned him and until he fulfilled the conditions they would stipulate; this is why they assembled in Shechem and not in Jerusalem."

As the story progresses, though, Malbim criticizes Rehoboam several times. First, in his comments on v. 12: "*And they came … as the king had*

---

17 This is the prevalent view among commentators, both ancient and modern: it was not a good idea to assign this mission to Adoram. See, for example, CHOON LEONG SEOW, "1 & 2 Kings" (*NIB*, III; Nashville, 1999), p. 102. One of the few who view the action in a positive light is JEROME T. WALSH, *1 Kings* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, Minn., 1996), p. 166.

spoken. This means that he should not have lost his temper when they came a second time, because he himself had told them, 'come back to me on the third day.'" Malbim wants to find a reason why the text repeats the information, already known to readers, that the people were complying with Rehoboam's instructions (v. 5) when they returned on the third day. Thus, he understands "as the king had spoken" not just as informative, but also as a critical evaluation of the king. The people have complied with his instruction. Why cannot he answer them pleasantly?

Second, Malbim assesses the young men's advice which Rehoboam adopts, as "foolish and ignorant" (on v. 10).

Third, v. 15 reflects the theological understanding of the division of the kingdom. Malbim exploits the beginning of his comment on this verse to fill in the plot:

He did not hearken. There is no doubt that they were still disputing with him and showing him, that he would not rule over them with the knout against their will. He should have listened to the people and foreseen how things would end up; but the Lord caused it all.

That is, Rehoboam has been given another chance to listen to the people and understand their suit. Malbim emphasizes that he should have listened to them, if only for utilitarian motives. Nevertheless, perhaps the king is not fully culpable, for, as Malbim notes, divine intervention influenced Rehoboam's decision.

Fourth, as I have already mentioned, in his explication of v. 18 Malbim is explicitly critical of Rehoboam's decision to send Adoram, the overseer of the forced labour battalions, to the people.

Fifth, there is an allusion to what Solomon had done. Malbim understands the people's reference to "the heavy yoke which your father laid on us" (v. 4) as follows: "They stated as their reason 'which your father laid on us,' that is, which he imposed by force and unlawfully." If so, Rehoboam's avidity to inherit an absolute monarchy is based on something that Solomon had done "unlawfully." Even if we say that here Malbim is reflecting the tribes' subjective view, rather than making an objective statement of fact, readers may feel that they are being urged to identify with the rebels.

The other side of the coin is Malbim's attitude towards the rebellious northern tribes – especially his gloss on the verb ויפשעו in v. 19: "Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day" (1 Kgs 12:19). Instead of taking the verb in its religious sense of *transgress* (which would make their action undoubtedly criminal), he understands it in the political

sense of "rebelled" (and thus morally neutral).[18] What is more, he adds an element not found in the text: "And now they were forced to crown a king to stand up against Rehoboam, who wanted to subdue them by force." The insertion of "were forced to" reflects Malbim's profound understanding of and perhaps even sympathy for the rebels.

It should certainly not be taken for granted that an Orthodox rabbi of the nineteenth century, known for his stern and zealous defence of tradition,[19] would be sympathetic to the actions of Jeroboam and his supporters, especially when, only a few verses later (12:26–33), we read about the radical religious reform introduced by the new king of the northern tribes – a reform that, it goes without saying, was anathema to Malbim. His attitude evidently indicates a human sensitivity that reflects his social involvement and understanding of the pain of the common folk. At the same time, this sympathetic evaluation is fully in keeping with the biblical text, inasmuch as Jeroboam's elevation is the fulfilment of a prophecy. As I read the story, Jeroboam is presented in a favourable light.[20] It also bears note that Malbim's stance is not one-sided. Despite all the sympathy for the rebels that we may find in his commentary, we cannot ignore his statement at the start of the pericope, where he writes that Rehoboam had automatically inherited the sceptre and there was no need to enthrone him, but "the Israelites were looking for an excuse and came to crown him." Clearly, he is of two minds about the story.

---

18 For this interpretation, see MORDECHAI COGAN and HAIM TADMOR, *II Kings* (Anchor Bible; New York, 1988), pp. 21–22 (on II Kings 1:1)

19 See, for example, two attacks on Malbim by *Maskilim* ("enlighteners") as found in contemporary nineteenth-century documents: (1) "[...] he has proven himself more and more to be the most dangerous enemy of civilization. [...] Instead of moving ahead and drawing the entire community after him, on the glorious road of progress, he keeps the people in the ignorance and fanaticism of the Middle Ages" (minutes of the conference of the Society for Jewish Culture, Bucharest, and February 6, 1863). (2) "This rabbi, instead of rousing and encouraging the people to act in accordance with the modern ideas and principles of the present day, exploits his position and does absolutely nothing other than to instil them with a fanatic spirit" (a petition asking the Ministry of Cults and Education to dismiss Malbim, July 11, 1859). Both documents are presented by JACOB GELLER, המלבי"ם: מאבקו בהשכלה וברפורמה בבוקרסט (תרכ"ד-תרח"י 1858-1864) (Lod, 2000), pp. 189–190 and 215.

20 On the positive evaluation of Jeroboam in the account of the division of the kingdom, see AMOS FRISCH, הקריעה הגדולה: סיפור פילוג הממלכה בספר מלכים (Beer Sheva, 2013), esp. pp. 245–246.

In conclusion, the distinction between synonyms, the attention to what seems to be superfluous information, the focus on the terms used to describe the characters, the spotlight on their motives, and his evaluation of their actions: all these are hallmarks of Malbim's commentary, as found here. However, they do not flow independently; rather, they are tributary streams that come together in the great river of the conflict between two models of government – absolute monarchy and limited constitutional monarchy. Their confluence in this single channel gives readers a sense of the strong unity of the story. What feeds all these tributaries and then the river itself? It is Malbim's desire to realize his program as he formulated it in his introduction to Joshua:

Here I have made the crooked straight and the hills into a valley. There is nothing redundant and nothing missing, no confusion and no disorder, for the entire text is full of wisdom and understanding and is self-evidently the words of the Living God, uttered through the spirit of God by those inspired by it, and the tablets are the work of God.

Or, to put it another way: his goal – a reaction to the aesthetic criticism of the school of Moses Mendelssohn, which, for Malbim, led people to read the Bible as just one more literary composition – is to uncover for readers the beauty and glory of the biblical narrative, which is a direct result of its holiness.[21]

---

21 Compare the remarks, in the introduction to his commentary on Leviticus, which refer to the conference of Reform rabbis in Braunschweig in 1844: "[…] the Written Law, which that evil congregation likened to the fables of the ancient peoples, and equated its poetry and orations with the poetry of Homer and the Greeks." For this assessment of Mendelssohn's commentary, see Rosenbloom: "As a result of this perspective, the Bible was stripped of its holiness and became no more than another work of classical literature, to be studied in the light of literary and aesthetic criteria. Without realizing it, Mendelssohn made a sharp turn from the sacred to the profane and pulled the Torah down from the heights of Mt. Sinai to the lowlands of literature" (NOAH H. ROSENBLOOM, המלבי"ם: פרשנות, פילוסופיה, מדע ומסתורין בכתבי הרב מאיר לייבוש מלבי"ם [Jerusalem, 1988]). In his introduction to Joshua, Malbim confesses that the Bible will be found inferior to secular writings if juxtaposed to them: "If readers compare the accounts in these histories with secular stories written by the scholars and savants of each generation, the chronicles of each nation from ancient times, they will see that the sacred books are worth less, according to the critics, than the books of scholars men who were gifted and fluent writers, and are quite inferior to them in all particulars." This is why Malbim makes such a strenuous effort to uncover the profundity of the biblical text and link it to its divine origin.