

1 & 2 KINGS

1 & 2 Kings recalls the history of the kingdoms of Israel: Judah in the south and Israel in the north, a period that extends from the death of King David (970 B.C.) to the Babylonian exile (587 B.C.). Both books were likely written by three different authors after King Josiah's reform in 621. In the Hebrew Scriptures, 1 & 2 Kings were originally one book and entitled simply by its first words: "*Now King David . . .*" Only later was the book divided in two. Kings was likely written during the time of Judah's captivity in Babylon (Iraq), after the Temple was destroyed and Jerusalem lay in ruins (c. 550).

The central focus of Kings is the rise and fall of David's southern kingdom—Judah. It was a time when the Jerusalem Temple with the Ark of the Covenant within the Holy of Holies was still intact (1 Kings 8:6). However after this glorious period in Israel's history there is a steady decline both spiritually and materially, beginning in the latter years of Solomon's reign and ending with the destruction of the Temple. Although Kings' focus is Israel's rulers, the prophets Elijah and Elisha are also prominent because of their hope-filled messages during the decline of both kingdoms.

Despite the message of Kings that Israel's success as a *nation* depends upon the people's obedience to God, every king of the northern kingdom (Israel) failed to meet this standard. Sin brought ruin to both kingdoms. Israel fell to the Assyrians, then Judah fell due to the Babylonians.

1 & 2 Kings in 3 parts

One of the high points of Kings is the rise of David's son, Solomon, who built and dedicated Jerusalem's first Temple.

1) **Kingdom united: King Solomon & Israel** (1 Kings 1-11). After a brief account of David's final days, the focus shifts to David's successor, Solomon (3-10). One reason for King Solomon's fame is that it was only during his reign that all twelve tribes were united under a single king. Indeed Solomon's reign points to the preliminary fulfillment of God's promise to David that his own "seed" or "offspring,"—a *son of David*—would one day be king over the twelve tribes of Israel. Solomon begins his reign by transforming the nation of Israel into an international kingdom, influencing not only the twelve tribes of Israel but also the surrounding Gentile nations. These are the "glory days" of Solomon, a time of peace and cultural enlightenment (1 Kings 4:20-21). Instead of Israel being separated from other nations as before, now "**men come from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon**" (1 Kings 4:34). For this "brief, shining moment," Israel begins to live out her call to be a light to the surrounding nations (Isaiah 60:3).

As king, Solomon does something that will distinguish him from all his successors; that is, when the Lord appears to Solomon in a dream and offers him anything he wishes, Solomon asks for wisdom, "**an understanding mind,**" to govern the people (1 Kings 3:9). And God blesses Solomon with profound wisdom, which is soon tested.

A case is presented to Solomon in which two prostitutes claim to be the mother of a child. To settle the matter, Solomon pretends to threaten to divide the child in two, knowing that the real mother would rather give up her claim than see the baby slain. Upon hearing this, the imposter "mother" agrees with Solomon that the child should be divided by the sword. With that, Solomon discovers who the true mother is and gives the child back to her. All the people praise the wisdom of Solomon (1 Kings 3:16-28).

Nowhere is Israel's glory more obvious than in the building of the first Temple. It is noteworthy that the massive project was not an Israelite-only undertaking; rather, Solomon forms a trade alliance with Gentile nations to help him in building the sanctuary (1 Kings 2-5:1-18). For

example, workers from Phoenicia (today's Lebanon and part of Syria) labored with Israelites to build the Temple. Phoenicians were expert in working with cedar which was used throughout the Temple. Unlike the portable Tabernacle-tent used during the time of Moses, the Jerusalem Temple would be built by both Jews and Gentiles. What Moses initiated centuries earlier for Israel alone, Solomon completed—but for all nations (Isaiah 56:7).

Of course for Israel the Temple is the center of the world; it is a new place of communion with God through covenant worship. Understanding the importance of the Temple to salvation history, one can appreciate the utter catastrophe when it was destroyed. Yet centuries later when the Temple is rebuilt (The Second or Herod's Temple), Jesus will stand before it and remark: **“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, ‘It took forty-six years to build this temple, and yet You will raise it up in three days?’ But He was speaking about the temple of His body”** (John 2:19-21).

The first Temple or Solomon's Temple took seven years to build and was richly decorated. When finally finished, it was dedicated in the seventh month during a festival which lasted for seven days (Festival of Booths or Tabernacles). The number *seven* was to remind everyone of the seven days of creation; for the Temple was to be a “renewed Eden” for divine *communion* with God's people. Even the spring of water that flowed from the Temple was named after one of the rivers of Eden (1 Kings 1:45; Genesis 2:13). Thus the central goal of the Exodus had been achieved: **“You will bring them and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance, The place, LORD, which You have made as Your dwelling, The sanctuary, Lord, which Your hands have established** (Exodus 15:17).

Like David his father, during the dedication of the Temple Solomon assumed the role of priest as he led the prayers, offered the sacrifices, and blest the people. When the Ark itself was at last carried solemnly into the Holy of Holies, it was seen as “enlivening” the Temple with God's glory, a glory not seen since the Exodus: **“Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle”** (Exodus 40:34). This is significant because at the time it was common for Gentle nations to house idols in grand structures so the spirits of the gods could enter and be present. But Solomon's Temple held the Ark of the Covenant. Thus for the first time the Law (Moses' tablets with the 10 Commandments), and not an idol was enshrined.

After the Temple was dedicated, Solomon's power and influence only grew (1 Kings 9:10-10:29). The Queen of Sheba (today's Yemen) paid Solomon a state visit. Besides being personally curious, she likely discussed trade relations and political alliances. For his part, despite the new era that the Temple was to inaugurate, Solomon had by then already given his heart over to worldly pleasures: wives, possessions, gold, horses, and weaponry. Slowly but surely Solomon became corrupt, finally committing the worst sin of all—idolatry. Influenced by his many foreign wives, Solomon built “high places” (altars) to the Moabite's supreme deity Chemosh, and also to Molech, the Canaanite god associated with child sacrifice. **“Thus also he did for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods”** (1 Kings 11:8). God punished Solomon's betrayal and depravity by declaring that enemies will rise up from within and outside the kingdom. Thus ended the reign of Solomon and the period of the united monarchy.

2) **Kingdom divided: Judah & Israel** (1 Kings 12:22). After the death of Solomon, there was a great dispute in Israel about who was to succeed him. Two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, refused to accept Solomon's son, Rehoboam, as king. Rehoboam was the offspring of Naamah, one of Solomon's foreign wives. **“And the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice and had**

commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods. But he did not keep what the Lord commanded. Therefore the Lord said to Solomon, “Since this has been your practice and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and will give it to your servant. Yet for the sake of David your father I will not do it in your days, but I will tear it out of the hand of your son. However, I will not tear away all the kingdom, but I will give one tribe to your son, for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem that I have chosen” (1 Kings 11:9-13). As a result, the tribes of Judah and Benjamin decided to forsake their inheritance and split from the other ten tribes to become the newly formed southern kingdom of Judah. Meanwhile the ten northern tribes remained one people and kept the name *Israel* for their kingdom. Now there were two nations, two “houses” or two “brothers” who became enemies. Thereafter two parallel histories of the two kingdoms are told (14-22). It was during this time that Elijah the prophet appears, the greatest of all the non-writing prophets, who condemns Israel’s idolatry and preaches a message of strict fidelity to Yahweh.

3) History of Judah and Israel to the time of the exile: (2 Kings 1-25) The two kingdoms fight not only each other but all outside attackers. The capital of the northern kingdom, Samaria, falls to the Assyrians in 721. From this point onward the Book of Kings centers largely on Judah in the south until the fall of its capital, Jerusalem, by the Babylonians in 587.

In the Book of Deuteronomy the key point is that there is only one God and only one legitimate Temple for worship (Deuteronomy 12). But repeatedly the northern kings reject exclusive worship of God. For example, Jeroboam I, the first ruler of the newly seceded northern kingdom of Israel, established two sanctuaries to rival the Temple of Solomon in the south. Located at Dan and at Bethel (both near Jerusalem), the king commissioned the construction of two golden calves and installed one at each shrine. This is the chief reason for the collapse of Samaria and later Judah; for God’s judgment is swift and just (Psalm 51). Even though some kings tore down these “high places,” succeeding kings rebuilt them (2 Kings 21:3).

Shrines and altars to the gods of Baal at Dan and Bethel were duplicated throughout Palestine. Sacrifices and incense were daily offered before graven images in violation of Deuteronomy’s call to abandon such worship: **“You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess serve their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and burn their Asherim (image of female deity) with fire, and you shall cut down the engraved images of their gods and obliterate their name from that place”** (Deuteronomy 12:2-3).

In creating these “high places,” worship of the One God was abandoned. Pre-Solomon’s Temple, the Israelites were to worship only at officially recognized places, that is, places blessed by the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 9:12-25). For example, David worshipped God in Gibeon (north of Jerusalem), where the Tabernacle was at the time. Likewise Solomon sacrificed one thousand burnt offerings in Gibeon (1 Samuel 9:12-15; 1 Kings 3:4; 1 Chronicles 16:39). However such places were meant to be temporary, **“because no house had yet been built for the name of the Lord”** (1 Kings 3:2). Therefore when Solomon did build the Temple in Jerusalem, there was no need for these other places of worship. And even though the people did not generally accept the false worship sites, Israel’s kings continued to erect them. Yet there is a ray of hope from the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 7, and his word of an everlasting Davidic kingdom. Faithful Jews would come to believe that God always keeps His word (1 Kings 2:4; 2 Kings 10:10).

The Book of Kings and the themes of king, prophet and priest.

The royal or kingly theme traces the downfall of the Davidic monarchy from the first of David's sons to the last; the lesson being that despite the infidelities of so many of David's sons, God extends His mercy and the covenant He made with David.

The prophetic theme dominates the center of the book—the ministries of Elijah and Elisha—when during the heyday of the northern kingdom these prophets took center stage. Indeed the prophetic theme is evidence that God always has other ways of working with his people. Thus the unexpected rise of Elijah and Elisha is another cause for hope in Israel's otherwise dismal history. Perhaps God will send another prophet like Moses to free His people from their Assyrian and Babylonian captors?

Finally, the priestly theme focuses on the Jerusalem Temple, the place of priestly ministry, and traces the story of God's sanctuary from its construction and dedication to its destruction by the Babylonians. The idol-worshipping northern kings, beginning with Jeroboam's construction of two golden calves, are condemned for promoting illicit sanctuaries (1 Kings 12). The southern kings are likewise judged for their toleration of illicit sanctuaries in their midst. 2 Kings ends with the hope that God may yet restore the house of David and the Jerusalem Temple.

