

1 and 2 Kings

ORIENTING DATA FOR 1 AND 2 KINGS

- **Content:** starting with the reign of Solomon, the story of the decline and eventual dissolution of the monarchy in Israel and the expulsion of God's people from the land
- **Historical coverage:** from the death of David (970 B.C.) to the sixth-century exile of Judah (586)
- **Emphases:** the evaluation of the monarchy on the basis of covenant loyalty; the fateful national consequences of disloyalty to Yahweh, resulting finally in expulsion from the land; the schism and civil wars between north and south; the rise of superpowers that, under the direction of God, subjugated Israel and Judah; the role of prophets who speak for God in Israel's national life

OVERVIEW OF 1 AND 2 KINGS

As with Samuel, the book of Kings was divided to fit on two scrolls. The title tells the story of its content, but it is also important to remember that in the Hebrew Bible, Kings concludes the Former Prophets, as a description of God's verdict of judgment on Israel's history. And you will hardly be able to miss the important role of the prophets in this book.

Kings covers the story of the monarchy from Solomon through its subsequent division into two kingdoms, to its demise in the north (Israel) and the exile of the final king in the south (Judah). This pretty well describes its "parts" also: 1 Kings 1–11 give an abbreviated account of Solomon's reign. Four things are important to the narrator: (1) how Solomon came to the throne, (2) his renown for wisdom, (3) the building of the temple and his palace, and (4) his demise and the reasons for it. The events surrounding the schism are narrated in 1 Kings 12–14. Crucial here is the reign of Jeroboam I, who, with echoes of Aaron and the golden calf, declares his golden calves in Dan and Bethel to be "your gods ... who brought you up out of Egypt" (12:28; Exod 32:4). This is then followed by alternating accounts of the northern and southern kings as their reigns overlap (1 Kgs 15–2 Kgs 17), where each northern king in turn is judged by God for "walking in the ways of Jeroboam and in his sin" (e.g., 1 Kgs 15:26, 34). Here the narrative is dominated by prophetic activity in the north, especially of Elijah and Elisha (1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 13), until the capture and destruction of Samaria, the northern capital.

The rest of the book (2 Kgs 18–25) tells the story of another 150 years of Judah's kings, until the fall of Jerusalem in 587/6 B.C. Over half of this last section concentrates on two notably good kings (Hezekiah, chs. 18–20; Josiah, chs. 22–23) and includes the prophetic activity of Isaiah (chs. 19–20).

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING 1 AND 2 KINGS

Whereas all history is written from a point of view, not all historians reveal their point of view as clearly as this narrator does (note his own summary of the history after the fall of Samaria, 2 Kgs 17:7–23). The Deuteronomic perspective on Israel's history that began with Joshua is especially pronounced in this telling of the story, both by its clear echoes of Deuteronomic themes and by the way the story is structured. Therefore, it is not surprising—since all the northern kings and the majority of those in the south evidenced disloyalty—that the story has distinct echoes of Judges with its spiral downward, as the promised curses of Deuteronomy 28:15–68 come to their inevitable fulfillment.

The key to everything is whether a given king has been loyal to the covenant with Yahweh. In Kings this is expressed in Deuteronomic terms—his attitude toward the central sanctuary (the temple in Jerusalem) and whether or not he advocated syncretism (e.g., Jeroboam's golden calves; see 2 Kgs 17:41) or rival gods altogether, especially Canaanite Baal worship (note how these distinctions are assumed in 1 Kgs 16:31–32 and 2 Kgs 10:28–29). This “program” is set up by the narrative of Solomon, whose long and prosperous reign is finally reduced to two matters. His one significant deed is the *building of the temple* in Jerusalem, which is filled with the glory of God (God's presence, 1 Kgs 8:10–11), precisely as with the tabernacle in Exodus 40:34–35. But he is finally judged for *going the way of all kings* (see Deut 17:16–17; 1 Sam 8:11–18) and for *promoting idolatry* through his many foreign wives (1 Kgs 11:1–13). These two items sit side by side in 1 Kings 8 and 9—in Solomon's prayer and Yahweh's response. The former emphasizes the significance of the temple for Israel's loyalty to Yahweh; the latter repeats the Deuteronomic blessings and curses, especially outlining the nature of the latter: “I will cut Israel off *from the land* I have given them” (9:7, emphasis added), “because they have forsaken the LORD [Yahweh] their God ... and have embraced other gods” (v. 9). For our narrator, this foretells the story he will proceed to unfold.

This view of things is also accented by several structural matters. First, all the kings are placed within the story by means of a common regnal formula:

1. when a king came to reign (in Israel or Judah) in relation to another king
2. how long he reigned and in what capital
3. (for Judean kings) the name of his mother
4. his religious policy: for the northern kings this consistently takes the form of following in “the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat”; for Judah the issue was whether the king followed Yahweh and whether or not he removed “the high places”
5. often the source for further information about the king
6. at the end, information about his death/burial and who succeeded him

Items 4 and 5 are especially telling. Item 4 is the only basis on which a given king is judged—no matter how long he ruled or what his other exploits or accomplishments might have been; item 5, therefore, tells the reader where the other kinds of materials might be found, e.g., in “the book of the annals of the kings of ...”

The second structural matter may be especially trying for those who might want a different kind of history. Many of the kings have almost nothing said about them beyond the regnal formula itself. And what is narrated about those who get more press, apart from accounts of

civil war, has almost altogether to do with their loyalty or disloyalty to Yahweh. This results in purposeful disproportions of major kinds: the overlapping reigns of Jeroboam II of Israel (forty-one years in Samaria) and Azariah (Uzziah) of Judah (fifty-two years in Jerusalem) are merely skimmed in seven verses each (2 Kgs 14:23–29; 15:1–7), while the twenty-two-year reign of Ahab and twenty-nine-year reign of Hezekiah cover several chapters each.

Third, this also accounts for the disproportionate space given to the prophets Elijah and Elisha. They become God’s agents in the holy war, but now over against the northern kings themselves and the foreign-born Baalist Jezebel. Through them God demonstrates that he is still Lord over all the earth (creation, nature; the nations; Israel). And thus the Deuteronomic cycle brings the story to its crashing end in the north; eventually the same thing happened in the south in terms of promised exile.

Finally, note that in contrast to the book of Samuel this story is eventually told in the context of major superpowers that have arisen—Assyria, then Babylon and Egypt. They become the instruments of God’s judgment that drive his people from the land, but they do so because Yahweh is the God of the nations and has brought them into power for this very purpose (Deut 28:49–52).¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 91–94.