

King Solomon and the Divided Monarchy

The Books of Kings

Like First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings were originally one work that was divided into two when it was translated into Greek in ancient times. Since they form a unit, this introduction will discuss both books as one. The Books of Samuel concern the creation of the monarchy and its early growth. In the Books of Kings, monarchy is an established fact, but the narrative continues to question its value. The narrative presents the history of the monarchy until the destruction of the northern kingdom in 701 BC and of the southern kingdom and Jerusalem in 587 BC.

First and Second Kings include many different literary forms, such as prophetic stories, battle narratives, and short notices concerning royal achievements. Some of this material was evidently drawn from sources now lost to us but mentioned in the text: “the book of the chronicles of Solomon” (1 Kings 11:41), “the book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel” (1 Kings 14:19), and “the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah” (1 Kings 14:29). The prophetic stories and other narratives may derive from oral tradition or now unknown written sources. The narrative structure is episodic; the many brief stories have no obvious relationship to one another. Consequently, many readers think of First and Second Kings as a loosely edited collection of various narratives. However, the attentive reader will find many patterns that hold the diverse narratives together and indicate the care with which the whole was compiled.

The Reign of Solomon

During the reign of Solomon, monarchy appears to be working out well. Israel becomes a populous and prosperous nation governed by a king renowned for his wisdom (1 Kings 5:1–14). In Jerusalem, Solomon constructs a palace for himself and a temple for God. The building of the Temple is a significant event marked by a chronological notice uniquely dated from the Exodus from Egypt (1 Kings 6:1). The importance of the Temple is further underscored by the detail with which it is described and the elaborate ceremonies at its dedication (1 Kings, chapters 6–8). Solomon places the ark of God in the Temple and God’s presence is manifested in a cloud like the one that appeared in the wilderness (1 Kings 8:10–11; Exodus 16:10, 24:18, 33:9, 40:34–50; Numbers 17:7). Solomon’s prayer in 1 Kings 8:22–54 indicates the role of the Temple in Israel’s religious life. This interest in the Temple continues throughout the narratives of Kings (1 Kings 14:25–26, 15:16–21; 2 Kings 12:5–17, 16:10–18, 22:3–9).

Although Solomon is presented as a great and wise king to whom God appears three times (1 Kings 3:5–14, 9:1–9, 11:11–13), he is not perfect. Contrary to the Law of Moses (Exodus 34:16, Deuteronomy 7:1–4), he takes foreign wives and begins to worship other gods (1 Kings 11:1–10). Consequently, God punishes Solomon by declaring that the kingdom of Israel would be divided after his death. This divine punishment comes to fruition in 1 Kings, chapter 12, when the northern tribes form their own kingdom because they object to the high taxes they had to pay to David’s dynasty to fund Solomon’s ambitious building program (1 Samuel 8:10–18). The explanation for how the kingdom of Solomon becomes two kingdoms involves double causation. The division comes from God, but it has mundane or human causes as well. This same double causation was evident in Absalom’s rebellion, which was God’s punishment of David but also motivated by a lack of justice in David’s rule. The biblical narrative repeatedly shows how God acts through human agency.



A Tale of Two Kingdoms

Once the kingdom divides into two parts, a new pattern emerges in the narrative. The southern kingdom (called Judah) retains Jerusalem and the Davidic dynasty and is presented as the more faithful of the two kingdoms. The northern kingdom (called Israel) is presented as less faithful because of the illegitimate cult established by its first king Jeroboam at Bethel and Dan (1 Kings 12:26–32). Nevertheless, the Books of Kings, unlike the Books of Chronicles, narrates the history of both kingdoms. This decision indicates that in spite of the political separation and its religious implications, the narrative understands both kingdoms as part of God’s People. This decision raises the problem of how to narrate two simultaneous histories. The narrative resolves this problem by following a simple system for determining when the focus shifts from one kingdom to the other. When, during the reign of a given king, his counterpart in the other kingdom dies, then the narrative shifts to the other kingdom to give an account of the new king. Thus, the kings are treated in the order in which they come to power, regardless of whether they reign in Judah or Israel. This procedure can result in some narrative peculiarities. For example, the war that Baasha wages against Asa is narrated in the reign of Asa (1 Kings 15:16–22) because Asa’s reign begins before Baasha’s. The effect, however, is that the narrative relates Baasha’s war before narrating the fact that Baasha has become king of Judah (1 Kings 15:33–34). By this means, the narrative tells the history of two separate yet connected nations.

As the narrative shifts from one king to another, the shift is clearly marked by a formulaic notice about the death of one king and the accession of another. These notices either introduce a king’s reign (1 Kings 15:9–11) or conclude it (1 Kings 15:23–24). These formulas have several functions. They indicate political continuity; neither kingdom is ever without a leader, as in the time of judges. They correlate the chronologies of the two kingdoms with each other (as opposed to some fixed point like the Exodus) in order to relate events in the two kingdoms more closely. Most significantly, the introductory formulas evaluate the kings as good or bad. The evaluations of Judean kings compare the kings to David, while the Israelite kings are compared to Jeroboam. Several Judean kings are evaluated positively and the sins of the remainder are overlooked for the sake of David and Jerusalem (1 Kings 11:12–13, 23–36; 15:4; 2 Kings 18:19, 19:34, 20:6). By contrast, all the northern kings are evaluated negatively because they do not abolish the illegitimate cult established by Jeroboam. This failure ultimately leads to the destruction of the northern kingdom (2 Kings, chapter 17). The southern kingdom suffers annihilation because Manasseh introduces Israelite sins into Judah (2 Kings 21:10–15; 22:16–17).

Kings and Prophets: Bridging the Gap

These evaluations of the kings are important for evaluating the monarchy. Many notices for northern kings indicate that they imitated Jeroboam in “the sin he had caused Israel to commit” (e.g., 1 Kings 15:34). This expression indicates the influence of the king on the people. In the time of the judges, the people were punished for their own sin. Under the monarchy, the people follow the leadership of the king rather than that of God. Consequently, the fate of the whole people becomes subsumed under the conduct of one man. In this way, the king comes between God and the people and the institution of monarchy increases the distance between God and the people. The intervention of the king between Israel and God can be beneficial if the king is good but disastrous if the king is bad.

In addition to switching the focus from one kingdom to the other, the narrative also switches between political and prophetic stories. The many stories about prophets may appear at times unrelated to the generally political concerns of the history. The relationship is clear when a prophet is confronting a king about an injustice (1 Kings, chapter 21), but at other times the prophetic stories seem to be narrated for



their own sake (2 Kings, chapters 1—8). The stories about prophets, however, seem to be arranged in significant ways around the political history. Prophecy becomes common during the period of the monarchy, whereas it was rare before (1 Samuel 3:1).

Why would prophecy become frequent when Israel is ruled by kings? The biblical text seems to understand both prophecy and monarchy as institutions that originate in the people's desire for distance from God. The people fear God's revelation at Mount Sinai and therefore ask Moses to serve as intermediary (Deuteronomy 5:22–31). This request establishes the pattern by which God speaks to his people through selected messengers rather than directly (Deuteronomy 18:15–18). God grants the Israelites' request for prophecy because it shows their fear of God and desire to obey. God reacts differently to the request for monarchy, perhaps because it does not give evidence of the same disposition to obedience (1 Samuel 8:7). The effect of monarchy is to increase the distance between God and the people. If the king is obedient and close to God, then he can bridge this distance. If the king is disobedient, however, then prophecy is all the more needed to bridge the gap between God and Israel.

During the reign of Solomon, there are no prophets because God communicates directly with the king. Subsequent kings, however, are farther from God, and God communicates with them through prophets. Furthermore, the majority of prophetic stories concern prophets in the northern kingdom (like Elijah and Elisha), because Israel is less faithful than Judah. Indeed, most of these stories occur during the dynasty of Omri, which was the worst of the northern dynasties. Omri's son Ahab marries the Sidonian princess Jezebel and introduces Baal worship into Israel (1 Kings 16:29–33).

Prophecy and the Fulfillment of God's Will

The stories about prophets also connect to another pattern in the Books of Kings. The narrative shows significant concern with the connection between prophecy and fulfillment. Prophets announce what God will do, and the prophesied events come to pass. The events are often described in terms that evoke the original prophecy (1 Kings 22:17,36). Sometimes, the narrative specifically notes when an event is the fulfillment of a previous prophecy (1 Kings 14:12,18). This prophecy–fulfillment pattern can link widely separated texts (1 Samuel 2:27–35 and 1 Kings 2:26–27, Joshua 6:26 and 1 Kings 16:34, 1 Kings 13:2 and 2 Kings 23:16–18). The explicit relationship between prophecy and history indicates that history unfolds according to God's will. For instance, God decrees the many dynastic changes in the northern kingdom (1 Kings 14:10–11; 15:29; 16:1–4,12–13; 21:21–22; 2 Kings 10:8–11,30; 15:12). Since God is ultimately Israel's king, God's control of history resembles the control exercised by kings over their courts (2 Samuel 15:32–37, 16:15–17:16).

Through the interplay of prophecy and politics, Israel struggles to negotiate its relationship to God. The people seek stability through monarchy at the expense of distancing themselves from God, and God seeks to overcome the distance through prophecy.

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