# The Books of Kings

The books of Kings form the closing part of the narrative which begins in Genesis and focuses on the story of Israel from its origins in Egypt to the ending of its political inde­pendence by the Babylonians. The division of the books of Kings from the books of Samuel is an artificial one, as is the further division of Kings itself into two books, which was introduced by the Septuagint.

## Outline of contents

Kings consists of an account of the Israelite nation written from a theological perspective and taking the history from its high point when it is one nation to its low point in the downfall of Judah.

(a) The reign of Solomon (1 Kgs 1—11): his accession (1—2), his successes (3—10), his failures (11).

(b) The divided nation (1 Kgs12—2 Kgs 17): Ephraim, the northern clans under Jeroboam, splits from Judah under Rehoboam. Ephraim (the majority of the clans, which retain the political name Israel) comes under pagan influence from the beginning and experiences many bloody coups before finally falling to Assyria. Judah is less paganized, though it is preserved only because of Yahweh’s faithfulness to his promise to David. The prophets Elijah and Elisha are heavily involved especially in the story of Ephraim.

(c) The nation of Judah (2 Kings 18-25): despite the reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah, the paganizing policy of Manasseh finally bears fruit in the downfall of Judah. But the conclusion of the books sounds a possible note of hope (25:27-30).

## Origin

The last event to which Kings refers is the exiled king Jehoiakin’s release from prison in Babylon in 561(2 Kings 25:27), so the books in their final form must come from after this time. But the main composition of the work may have been undertaken soon after the downfall of Judah, either in Judah or in Babylon. An earlier, first edition may date to the reign of Josiah. There may also be hints of later situations: the dating of the building of the temple (1 Kgs 6:1) perhaps reflects a chronological scheme which places that event midway between the exodus and the temple’s rebuilding after Judah’s restoration (Ezra 1—6).

The books are anonymous. The people responsible for the work are often described as the Deuteronomists. This description reflects the view that the books are not merely the last part of the story begun in Genesis, but more specifically the last part of the “Deuteronomistic history,” which begins with Deuteronomy. On this view, the story from Joshua to Kings has been written or edited as a whole to show how principles declared in Deuteronomy worked out in Israel’s history from Joshua’s time, via the period of the judges and the united monarchy, to the downfall of Judah. Admittedly, the em­phases of Deuteronomy by no means coincide with those of Kings. The humanitarian, social and moral concerns of Deuteronomy are not reflected in Kings. Conversely, while Deuteronomy stresses the central sanctuary (though without refer­ring explicitly to Jerusalem) and refers to the monarchy (though without ascribing to it the theological significance it receives in Judah), these do not have the importance they receive in Kings.

## Literary characteristics

The formal structure of Kings is provided by a reign-by-reign treat­ment of the history. During the period when there are the two nations, the accounts of Ephraimite and Judahite kings are allowed to interweave in order to preserve a broadly chronological treatment. Each king is summarily described and evaluated according to a pattern, which may be perceived by examining the short accounts of the reign of Jehoshaphat (1 Kgs 22:41-50) or Amon (2 Kgs 21:19-26). Usually this summary description and evaluation is the framework within which other material is en­closed, so that its opening and closing elements may be separated by several chapters (see e.g., the account of the reign of Hezekiah, 2 Kgs 18—20). The accounts of Solomon, Rehoboam, Ahab, Jehoram, Jehu and Joash, for in­stance, include considerable narra­tive material centering on royal and political matters. Other narratives center on prophets, especially Elijah, Elisha, and Isaiah. Some­times these prophets are involved in royal and political matters (revealingly, however, the Ephraimite king is not even named in 2 Kgs 5—7: he is not the real center of interest). Other narratives concern the pro­phets’ personal lives and ministries (e.g., *2* Kings 4). The Deuteronomistic perspective of the work as a whole is expounded most system­atically in an extensive theological comment which closes off the history of Ephraim (2 Kings 17).

Kings does not aim to write “objective” or “critical” history of a Western kind. It is history with a message, and the events it relates are chosen in accordance with their relevance to the message. It is thus not a political history, and some periods of great political significance (such as the reign of Omri) are passed over relatively briefly because they are of little sig­nificance in relation to the writer’s concern with the history of Israel’s relationship with Yahweh.

Within the Deuteronomistic framework, however, it includes material of recognized historical value. The summary frameworks refer the reader to “the book of the acts of Solomon” and to the annals of the kings of Judah and of Ephraim for further information on the vari­ous reigns, and these might be the sources of many of the bare historical facts passed on by Kings (such as the name of a king’s mother and the brief refer­ences to specific events). Complex chronological problems are raised by the dates provided for the kings’ reigns(one solution for these problems is provided by E. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings,* 1965). Beyond these royal annals,1 Kings 1-2 forms the original ending of an account of how Solomon came to the throne, which extends back at least to 2 Samuel 9. But we do not know the nature of the authors’ sources beyond the royal annals to which they actually refer, is not clear.

The authors’ method of com­position means that their work is not a smooth literary whole, but it both gives us access to the material they pass on from their sources in a largely un-redacted form, and impresses a degree of unity on the whole by the distinctive framework in which they set this material. Sometimes the source material, or the collected form of a section of the material, may fruitfully be treated by studying it as a literary work.

## Emphases

1. We have noted that Kings begins at the high point of the period covered by the Deuteronomistic history, the united monarchy. The fact that this is the high point reflects the importance of the Davidic monarchy and the temple of Solomon. Yahweh’s commitment to David (2 Sam 7:11-16) is often referred to by Yahweh and by the narrator as the explanation for Yahweh’s faithfulness to Judah and to David’s successors (1 Kgs 6:12; 11:12-13, 36; 2 Kgs 8:19; 19:34), and David’s loyalty to Yahweh is frequently (and slightly surprisingly) a standard by which later kings are evaluated (e.g., 1 Kgs 9:4; 2 Kgs 22:2). But the repercussions of one king’s reign in later times can also be negative: the sins of Manasseh are ultimately the cause of Judah’s downfall (2 Kgs 24:3-4). Thus the well-being of the people as a whole is tied up with the behavior of the king (2 Kings 21:11-15).
2. The building of the Temple is the climax of the opening chapters of Kings. 1 Kings 8 focuses the Kings theology of the temple, which is the dwelling-place of Yahweh’s name. W. Eichrodt *(Theology of the OT* 2, pp. 23-45) sees Yahweh’s name as the most sophisticated OT form of “the spiritualization of the theophany”—a way of talking of the real revelatory presence of God without com­promising his transcendence. The importance of the temple makes it a crucial touchstone for the evaluation of the kings. Jeroboam I is condemned for devising alternative places and forms of worship for Ephraim (1 Kgs 12—13), and his successors are condemned for continuing to have recourse to these; Josiah, the antitype to Jeroboam, appearing near the end of the story as Jeroboam appears near its beginning, is commended for his reform of temple worship and for his destruction of high places generally and of the sanctuary at Bethel in particular (2 Kgs 22—23).
3. Kings’ attitude to the monarchy and to the temple shows that these are not to be seen as absolutes. They are subject, first of all, to the Torah. “The Deuteronomist sees the main problem of the history of Israel as lying in the question of the correct correlation of Moses and David” (von Rad, *OT Theology,* 1, p. 339). The Davidic promise can be relied on only as long as the Mosaic covenant demand is accepted. Thus the great villain of the story of Judah in Kings is Manasseh; the list of his acts corresponds to what Deuteronomy says Israel should not do (cf. 2 Kgs 21:2-9 with Dt 17:2-4; 18:9-12). Conversely the story of its great hero, Josiah, emphasizes the significance of his discovery of the “book of the covenant,” giving it first mention inits account of his reign (contrast the account in 2 Ch 34), and the list of his acts corresponds closely to what Deuteronomy says Israel should do. Thus the requirements and sanctions of the Torah (specifically of Deuteronomy) provide the principles for understanding Israel’s history. When kings obey the Torah (especially its demand for faithful worship at the central sanctuary), they generally prosper. When they ignore it, they do not.
4. The spoken word of the prophet succeeds and supports the written word of Moses (cf. the role of Huldah in the discovery of the Torah book in 2Kgs 22:13-20), and also demands the attention of king and people. “What fascinated [the Deuteronomist] was, we might say, the functioning of the divine word in history” (cf. 1 Kgs 8:24) (von Rad, “The Deuteronomistic Theo­logy of History in the Books of Kings,” in *Studies in Deutero­nomy*, p. 91). Thus Kings pictures “a course of history which was shaped and led to a ful­filment by a word of judgment and salvation continually injected into it” (von Rad, *OT Theology* 1, p. 344). This point is made by including lengthy stories about prophets, especially as regards their involvement in thenation’s political life. “In the decisive political events the initiative stems from prophets, who “change the gears of history with a word of God” (p. 342). It is also made by criss-crossing the story with prophecies and their ful­fillment (e.g. 1 Kgs 11:29-39 and 12:15; 1 Kgs 13:1-10 and 2 Kgs 13:15-18; 2 Kgs 20:16-17 and 24:13). The stress on how true prophecies were fulfilled may reflect concern with the problem of false prophecy during the time after Judah’s downfall. A king’s attitude to the prophet’s word forms another index of his attitude to God (Hezekiah, Josiah).
5. One of the emphases of the covenant as ex­pounded in Deuteronomy is that God blesses those who are faithful to him but brings trouble to those who disobey him (Dt 28—30). Thus in Kings the material concerning Solomon’s reign is arranged so that Solomon’s setbacks are seen as consequences of his association with foreign women (1 Kgs 11). On the other hand, Kings recognizes that God’s justice does not always work out in this way. Manasseh enjoys a long reign, and his apostasy brings its fruit only decades later (2 Kgs 21; 24: 1- 4). Josiah is responsive to Yahweh’s word, but dies an early and tragic death (2 Kgs 23:29).

## Message and purpose

The function of Kings’ review of the history which led up to the downfall of Judah is to explain why this event came about and to express an admission that there was ample cause for God to judge Israel. It is a form of confession, or “an act of praise at the justice of the judg­ment of God’; “this statement with its apparent lack of hope for the future lays the only possible foundation for the future” (Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration*,p. 78, following von Rad) because it throws the people of God totally back on the grace of God.

The possibility of hope for the future is hinted at in the way the theological emphases of Kings remain open to the future. Perhaps God’s commitment to David still holds: the release of Jehoiakin, related in the final paragraph of Kings, may make this hope explicit. Although the temple has been pillaged and burnt, prayer is still possible in the temple, or towards it on the part of people who are cut off from it, and God has undertaken to hear such prayer (see 1 Kgs 8-9). Although judgment has come in accordance with the sanctions of the covenant, the same covenant allows for the possibility of repentance and restoration after judg­ment (see 1 Kgs 8:46-53; cf.Dt 30). Although the prophetic words which Israel ignored form a further reason for its punishment, the fact that those prophetic words of judg­ment have come true may encour­age the hope that the prophetic promises of restoration (e.g.,those of Jeremiah) may come true, too.

Thus the aim of Kings is in part didactic, “to present the divine view of Israelite history” (R. K. Har­rison, *Introduction to the OT*,p. 722). There are also at least hints of the kerygmatic, of good news (cf.E.W. Nicholson, *Preaching to the Exiles*,p. 75). Kings opens up the possibility of there being a future. On the basis of this possibility it further seeks to be parenetic, in that it implicitly challenges the people to turn back to Yahweh in repentance, faith, and commitment to obedience (cf.1 Kgs 8:46-50). For “the judgment of 587 did not mean the end of the people of God; nothing but refusal to turn would be the end” (von Rad, *OT Theology,* 1, p. 346).

## Context and implications

Kings is thus one of the several responses to the downfall of Judah. It bears comparison es­pecially with Lamentations (which expresses the feelings and tentative hopes of people in Judah after the fall of Jerusalem) and with the book of Jeremiah (whose material was collected and assembled in this same period and manifests many literary and theo­logical points of contact with Kings; see Nicholson, *Preaching to the Exiles).* Kings may also be studied in the light of parallel treatments of events it narrates as these appear in Chronicles, Isaiah, and Jeremiah (see e.g., B. S. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis*, 1967).

In a volume of expositions of passages from 2 Kings, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (pp. 13-21), J. Ellul suggests that Kings makes a twofold distinc­tive contribution to the canon of scripture. First, it pictures God’s involvement in political life, and thus warns both against under­valuing the importance of politics, and against absolutizing this realm (since it shows how God brings judgment on politics). Second, it displays the interplay of the free determination of human beings (who in vari­ous political situations makes their decisions and put their policies into effect) and the free decision of God (who nevertheless effects his will through or despite these deliberate human acts).

In reaction to an overstress in recent biblical study on the idea of God as the one who acts in history, the importance of this motif in the Bible is in danger of being under-stressed. Kings is a book which particularly emphasizes this motif (see Goldingay, “‘That you may know that Yahweh is God’: A study in the relationship between theology and historical truth in the Old Testament,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 23 [1972], pp. 58-93; and on the application of this idea today, see D. N. Freedman, “The biblical idea of history’, *Interpretation* 21 [1967], pp. 32-49). God is one who works out a purpose in history, and his people may use the marks of his footsteps in past history to see what he may be doing in the present.