

The Old Testament: Part Nine

1 and 2 Kings: 1 and 2 Chronicles

The two books of Kings cover the history of the monarchy from the reign of Solomon in 970 B.C. to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. After the death of Solomon, the united kingdom was divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Each king in the north and in the south was judged by the book's author(s) according to whether or not he was faithful to God's covenant with Israel. As we shall see, nearly all of the kings were unfaithful and, according to the author writing for those in exile, *this* was the reason for all the bad things that had happened to their nation—their leaders turned from God and allowed pagan worship to replace true worship of God.

FIRST BOOK OF KINGS

Division of chapters. One simple way to divide the chapters of the book is as follows:

- **Chapters 1-11:** Reign of Solomon, a united kingdom
- **Chapters 12-22:** Israel and Judah, a divided kingdom

Commentary. For a fuller commentary on the Books of Kings, see my *Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament*, Articles 29-32. We will now look at some of the passages in these books.

Chapter 3: Solomon asks for wisdom

After offering sacrifice in the sanctuary, Solomon has a dream in which God reveals himself, telling him: “*Ask something of me and I will give it to you*” (v.5). Solomon asks for an understanding heart so that he can distinguish right from wrong and govern God's people with wisdom (v.9). God is so pleased with Solomon's request that he grants Solomon not only wisdom but also great riches and glory. In God's words to Solomon, we note in verse 14 a conditional clause: “*If you follow me by keeping my commandments, I will give you long life.*”

Verses 16-28—Solomon displays his wisdom. This well-known story is told to illustrate Solomon's wisdom. He knows that the true mother of the child would sacrifice anything to protect her child.

Chapters 4-8: The Temple

David wants to build God a temple to house the Ark of the Covenant but God says no, stating that his Son will build the Temple. Chapters 5:15-7:52 give a detailed account of the building of the Temple. Chapter 8

describes the Dedication Ceremony. In his commentary on 1 and 2 Kings, Richard Nelson states: “*When it comes to a big public liturgy, little has changed in three thousand years! A showy procession and impressive religious actions frame a lot of talking: a poem (vv 12-13), comments on the significance of the occasion (vv 15-21)...and a forecast of hopes and expectations (vv 56-61)*” (p.49).

Chapter 10: Queen of Sheba visits Solomon

Chapter 10 is further evidence that God has fully kept the promise he made to Solomon in 3:12-13: “*I will give you a wise and understanding mind...riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you all your days.*” The visit of the Queen of Sheba is an opportunity for Solomon to showcase his wisdom and wealth. He is portrayed as a person of international diplomacy. He has peace and wealth at home and cooperative relations with other countries. When the Queen of Sheba comes, she is overwhelmed with what she sees and experiences. Solomon's wealth and wisdom go way beyond the reports she has heard.

Chapter 11: Sins of Solomon

“*Solomon loved many foreign women...from nations with which the Lord had forbidden the Israelites to intermarry, 'because,' he said, 'they will turn your hearts to their gods'*” (vv 1-2).

As we finish reading chapter 10, we might say “all was rosy in the garden.” Solomon is blessed with wisdom and wealth. He enjoys peace at home and abroad. But the seeds of destruction were sown early on in Solomon's reign. In 3:1-3, Solomon marries Pharaoh's daughter and he worships at “high places.”

Solomon's other wives turn his heart from following God's ways (v.3). His marriages to foreign women are contracted for political ends and shrines are built for his wives and traders. Such contracts, however, have jeopardized the purity of Israel's religion which strictly forbids such marriages and tolerance of pagan worship (Dt 17:14-17). Because of Solomon's failure to follow God's ways, he receives a third and final visit from the Lord who tells him: “*Since this is what you want, and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes which I enjoined on you, I will deprive you of the kingdom and give it to your servant. I will not do this during your lifetime; however, for the sake of your father David, it is your son whom I will deprive. Nor will I take away the whole kingdom; I will leave your son one tribe for the*

sake of my servant David and of Jerusalem, which I have chosen” (11:11-13).

For the sake of political stability, economic prosperity, unrestrained lust, and military strength, Solomon triggers an earthquake that will shake the kingdom of Israel to its foundations. Because of God’s love for David, the consequences of Solomon’s sin will not occur during his lifetime, but during the lifetime of his son.

Now we turn to one of the darkest periods in Israel’s history: the division of the nation into two kingdoms.

Chapter 12: Revolt of the northern tribes

“Your father put on us a heavy yoke. If you lighten the harsh service and the heavy yoke your father imposed on us, we will serve you” (v. 4).

After Solomon dies, all Israel assemble at Shechem to make his son, Rehoboam, king. The above quoted verse shows us how harsh Solomon had become on his people. He ended his reign as a tyrant. When the people plead with Rehoboam to lighten their burden, he asks for three days to reflect on their request. He listens to the old men and young men but follows instead the foolish advice of his peers. Rehoboam’s action leads to the division of the kingdom which is described in economic (vv 1-25) and religious (vv 26-39) terms. Henceforth, the term ‘Israel’ is normally used to refer to the northern kingdom, but is sometimes used to speak of the whole nation (e.g., the phrase “God of Israel” (1Kgs 17:1) is intended to mean the whole nation). The southern kingdom, made up of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, is called Judah.

Chapters 17-19, 21: The prophet Elijah

The figure of Elijah dominates 1Kings 17-19, 21, and 2Kings 1-2. Elijah is regarded as one of Israel’s greatest prophets. In chapter 17, Elijah performs two miracles to show that the God of Israel, not Baal, is the one who gives life. Prophets are raised up by God to call the people to covenant fidelity with their God. They warn of judgment and punishment for infidelity but also give hope of restoration if the people turn from their evil ways.

Chapter 18: God and Baal battle on Mount Carmel

This event is one of the most humorous stories in the Bible. Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to a contest to see whose God is more powerful. Elijah presents the challenge: *“The god who answers with fire is God.”* All the people answer: *“Agreed!”* (1Kgs. 18:24).

From morning till night, the prophets of Baal call out to him to light the fire: *“Answer us, Baal!”* (v.26). When there is no response, Elijah suggests that they shout louder, as their god may be praying or resting. They then whip themselves into a frenzy but nothing works. *“There was not a sound; no one answered, and no one was listening”* (v.29). Point: there is no answer because there is no Baal.

Then Elijah builds his altar, placing twelve stones on it to remind the people that Israel consists of twelve tribes and not just ten. He has his opponents drench the altar with water three times. Then Elijah calls out to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel to bring down fire on the altar. Thereupon, God responds with a fire is so powerful that it consumes everything on the altar. The people are impressed. They fall on their knees and say: *“The Lord is God! The Lord is God!”* The prophets of Baal are put to death as a sign that evil has been removed from the land of Israel.

Chapter 19: A depressed prophet wants to leave his ministry

This is a very beautiful story. In verses 4-5, Elijah says: *“This is enough, O Lord! Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers.’ He lay down and fell asleep under the broom tree, but then an angel touched him and ordered him to get up and eat.”*

After the wicked Jezebel hears of Elijah’s great victory over the prophets of Baal, she becomes very angry and seeks to kill Elijah. Afraid for his life, Elijah flees to the desert. He becomes so discouraged that he wants to die. But then an angel of the Lord comes to him to comfort him and give him new strength to continue his prophetic ministry.

SECOND BOOK OF KINGS

In its introduction to 2Kings, the *Application Study Bible* reads:

Second Kings continues the history of Israel, halfway between the death of David and the death of the nation. Israel had been divided (1 Kings 12), and the two kingdoms had begun to slide into idolatry and corruption toward collapse and captivity. Second Kings relates the sordid stories of the 12 kings of the northern kingdom (called Israel) and the 16 kings of the southern kingdom (called Judah). For 130 years Israel endured the succession of evil rulers until they were conquered by Shalmaneser of Assyria and led into captivity in 722 B.C. (17:6). Of all the kings in both the north and south, only two—Hezekiah and Josiah—were called good. Because of their obedience to God and the spiritual

revivals during their reigns, Judah stood for an additional 136 years until falling to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians in 586 B.C.” (p.564).

In **Chapter 2**, Elisha succeeds Elijah as Israel’s prophet. In the next several chapters of Second Kings, we read about the wonders and miracles that God works through Elisha. Two of his most dramatic miracles are told in chapter 4.

- *From death to life* (vv 8-37). A well-to-do woman from Shunem realizes that Elisha is a man of God and offers him hospitality. She is rewarded with a son. When the son dies, the mother is understandably very upset and lets Elisha know of her anger (v.28). She demands that Elisha come to see her dead son. Anticipating the power of Jesus over death, Elisha raises the dead boy to life.
- *From hunger to plenty* (vv 42-44). This story clearly reminds us of Jesus’ miracles of the loaves and fishes. Elisha orders that twenty barley loaves, normally used as a *first fruits* offering, be served on this occasion to feed a hundred starving men. Not only do the few loaves suffice to feed the hungry men, but there are leftovers (v.43). In all these stories, the “man of God” is a Jesus figure who goes about doing good.

The second half of the Second Book of Kings is mainly focused on the failures of the kings in both kingdoms to get rid of pagan shrines and practices. Some things to note.

Chapter 17

The northern kingdom of Israel (which consists of ten of the twelve tribes) falls to the Assyrians, and those who were not killed or deported intermarry with the pagan people that Assyria resettled in Israel. The resulting syncretistic mixing of religions gives rise to beliefs and practices quite different from Israel’s heritage. Unlike the exiled remnant of Judah in Babylon, who will eventually be allowed to return to the Promised Land, the exiled Israelites in effect “disappear.” They are either absorbed into the foreign peoples among whom they are sent, or assimilated with the foreigners now living among them in Israel. They are called “Samaritans.” These northern ten tribes have no corporate experience of return and are referred to by same as the “Ten Lost Tribes.”

Chapter 22: Josiah, best king ever

Speaking of Josiah, 2 Kings 23:25 states: “*Before him there had been no king who turned to the Lord as he did, with his whole heart, his whole soul, and his whole*

strength, in accord with the entire law of Moses; nor could any after him compare with him.”

Josiah purges the nation of all symbols of pagan worship and reestablishes the celebration of the Passover. Unfortunately, his religious reform dies with him. All of his successors will do what is evil in the sight of the Lord.

Chapters 24-25: Judah is exiled from the land

“He deported all Jerusalem: all the officers and men of the army, ten thousand in number, and all the craftsmen and smiths. None were left among the people of the land except the poor” (24:14).

Introducing his commentary on these final two chapters of 2Kings, Richard Nelson writes:

These last chapters of Kings chronicle the violent dismantling of the nation of Judah. The institutions launched so gloriously by Solomon at the beginning of the book have gradually decayed, chapter by chapter. Now the pace of dissolution snowballs. Judah collapses under the punitive brutality of two Babylonian invasions.

Kings pulls no punches in describing this final catastrophe. By the time the reader reaches the last sentence of this section (25:26), the absolute worst has happened. The kings after David’s line are in prison (24:12; 25:7). The skilled and useful classes of Judah’s society have been exiled (24:14-16, 25:11) or killed (25:18-21), leaving only the peasantry (25:12). The city and temple have been burned, the wall demolished (25:9-10), the last remnants of Solomon’s greatness broken up, melted down, and taken away (24:13, 25:13-17)” (p.261).

25:8-17 describes the sad story of the destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon’s temple and palace. “*He burned the house of the Lord, the palace of the king, and all the houses of Jerusalem; every large building was destroyed by fire*” (v.9).

BOOKS OF CHRONICLES

St. Jerome, an early Father of the Church, gave us the title for these two books of the Bible when he said that they were “a chronicle of the whole of divine history.” One of the first things the reader may notice when reading 1 and 2Chronicles is that large chunks of it are quite similar to the material covered in the Books of Samuel and Kings. Two main differences are that the author of Chronicles idealized the life of David by omitting his faults and sins, and placed a lot more

emphasis on the importance of worship in the life of Israel. Temple worship must be the focal point of their lives.

Chapters 1-9: Genealogical tables

Most likely, modern readers of the Bible are amazed that the author of a book of the Bible would dedicate nine chapters to genealogies. In his commentary on Chronicles, J.F. McConville writes: “*Broadly speaking, genealogies show that the promises and purposes of God continue*” (p.8). Having noted that the genealogical tables were written for the exiles returning from Babylon, McConville states that they were intended to make a theological statement, namely, that the exile was not the end of the history of Israel. Rather, with it behind, the Israelites came again to “ *dwell in their cities, to repossess the territory, or at least part of it which the Lord had given them centuries before, and of which the exile had seemed to deprive them forever*” (p.11). Furthermore, genealogies were used by the Israelites to show that they did belong to the family of Abraham, God’s chosen people. Genealogies also stress the importance of a spiritual heritage. “*The Christian will value these chapters as a basis and foreshadowing of those genealogies of Jesus, Son of David.... Monotony and inconsistencies of this literary form must not blind a modern reader to its indispensable role replaced nowadays by parish and civil record offices, in vindicating legitimacy of both family and faith*” (Jerome Bible Commentary, p.408).

A close look at the nine chapters of genealogical tables will lead us to see that most of the chapters (2-8) are given to the twelve sons of Jacob, who of course are the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. Secondly, we will note that *three* of the tribes—Judah (David’s tribe), Levi (the priestly tribe) and Benjamin (the smallest tribe but also Saul’s tribe)—receive much more attention than the other nine tribes. David’s family line is the focus of the whole of chapter 3.

Prayer of Jabez. In 4:10, Jabez prays to the God of Israel: “*Bless me and enlarge my territory. Help me and make me free of misfortune, without pain.*” And God grants his prayer. Some years ago, a minister wrote a small book called *Prayer of Jabez* which became very popular. The author encouraged readers to think big and not to be afraid to ask God for big blessings. I once prayed the prayer, and shortly after, my bishop called me to move to my current parish which is a lot larger than my previous one. When I prayed the *Prayer of Jabez*, I was not thinking about a larger parish. My prayer is a good example of the saying: “Be careful what you pray for!”

The genealogical introduction concludes with a list of those who returned to form the post-exilic community of Judah (9:1-44). The bulk of this list is made up of priests, Levites and various temple functionaries. This is because the worship life of Israel is the main focus of 1-2 Chronicles.

Chapter 10

The chronology of chapters 1-9 covers Israelite history from Creation to the exile in Babylon (586 BC). At this point, the narrative goes back to the beginning of Israel’s kingdom period, picking up with Israel’s first king, Saul. 1Chronicles 10 begins with Saul’s death. To learn about his reign, read 1Samuel.

Whereas 23 chapters (9-31) of 1Samuel touch upon the story of Saul, the Chronicles author gave him only one chapter. His main interest was to point out that Saul was a failure because he was unfaithful to the Lord, did not keep the Lord’s commandments, and did not seek guidance from the Lord (v.13).

The phrase “*the Lord slew him*” (v.13) can be interpreted as meaning, in the mind of God, that Saul’s time was up. It was time to transfer the kingdom to a man after God’s own heart.

Chapter 11: David, king of Israel, and his warriors

We get some sense of how important David and Solomon were to the chronicler, considering that they occupied the stage from this chapter until 2Chronicles 9, i.e., 28 of the 65 chapters. The chronicler’s aim was to present his people with two models of what life could be like in their nation if they would only follow the ways of God and pay proper attention to worship. Central to the chronicler’s idealized picture of what the nation could be was the worship life of Israel. Hence, many of the upcoming chapters will focus on the Temple, the Ark of the Covenant, and the organization of right worship.