

1 KINGS

Part One: A Kingdom United (Chapters 1-11)

INTRODUCTION

The Books of Kings are the final two books in what is called the D (Deuteronomistic) History of Israel, a section of the Old Testament that includes Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. They are called D History because they are written from a perspective strongly influenced by the Book of Deuteronomy. In these books, the leaders and kings of Israel are judged on one issue: fidelity to Israel's covenant with God. As we shall see, nearly all the kings were judged to be failures because they ignored the laws of God outlined in the Book of Deuteronomy.

Historical context. Most scholars believe that the Books of Kings were written by an Israelite who had experienced the terrible event called the Babylonian Exile. 2 Kings ends with the release of Judah's last king from prison in Babylon. The Books of Kings were written to help the Israelites, especially those in exile, to understand the devastating events surrounding the exile. How could God allow the destruction of David's kingdom of Judah? What about God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 concerning an *eternal dynasty*? Has God gone back on his promise? Why did God allow Solomon's temple to be destroyed? Was Marduk who ruled in Babylon greater than Israel's God?

The author of 1 and 2 Kings sets out to show that the collapse of the nation, the destruction of the temple, and the exile are all due to Israel's infidelity to her covenant with God, and especially the infidelity of her kings. The books are also intended to give hope to the exiles: if they repent and turn back to the Lord, he will forgive them and restore them to his favor (1Kgs 8:46-50).

The period covered in 1 and 2 Kings is about 400 years—from the end of the reign of David (approximately 960BC) to the Babylonian exile (586BC).

The story. David's reign comes to an end, and he is succeeded by his son Solomon, whose reign is described in great detail. After Solomon's reign, the kingdom is divided in two: Israel in the north, with its own centers of worship to rival Jerusalem, and Judah in the south. Twenty kings, all judged unfaithful, rule the northern kingdom over a period of approximately 200 years until the north collapses in

722-721BC, and its population is led into exile. In the south, David's descendants (20 in all, one of whom is known to be a usurper) rule for a period of about 360 years, until the time of the Babylonian exile in 586 BC. Several of the southern kings attempt reform but ultimately their efforts are too little, too late.

Division of chapters in 1 Kings

As with other books of the Bible, writers divide the chapters of Kings in various ways. One simple way to divide 1 Kings is:

Chapters 1-11: Reign of Solomon—a united kingdom

Chapters 12-22: Israel and Judah—a divided kingdom

Finally, it should also be noted that 1 and 2 Kings reflect a clear bias in favor of Judah, the southern kingdom ruled by David's successors. Not a single king from the northern kingdom received a positive evaluation. Only a few kings in the south were praised. In the author's eyes, the majority of the kings promoted or at least allowed pagan worship into their kingdom.

COMMENTARY

CHAPTER 1: Adonijah and Solomon proclaim themselves king

"Take with you the royal attendants. Mount my son Solomon upon my mule and escort him down to Gihon...then blow the horn and cry, 'Long live King Solomon!'" (vv 33-35)

Saul and David became king through the prophetic word and the anointing of God's servant Samuel. As we shall see, this is not the way Solomon became king.

1Kings opens with a description of David as "old and cold." It is the writer's way of telling us that David's reign is coming to an end which raises the question of who will be his successor.

Verses 5-53 – Solomon takes over his father's throne. These verses cover the story of Solomon's succession to the throne of David. Adonijah, David's oldest son, attempts with the help of Joab and Abiathar to have himself declared David's successor (vv. 5-10). In the meantime, Nathan the prophet, with

the help of Bathsheba, persuades David to nominate Solomon as king (vv. 11-40).

When Adonijah and his supporters hear that Solomon has been declared king by the wish of his father, they become scared and run to their homes.

Pause: How can a Christian in 'corporate America' seek to promote himself without violating Christian principles?

CHAPTER 2: David's last words and death

David said to his son Solomon: *"Keep the mandate of the Lord, your God, following his ways and observing his statutes, commands, ordinances and decrees as they are written in the law of Moses..."* (v.3).

Chapter 2 has two parts: David's farewell and death (vv 1-12) and the establishment of Solomon's powers (vv 13-46).

Verses 1-12—David's final words and death.

David's final words give expression to his *spiritual* and *political* side. On the one hand, he speaks to Solomon about the importance of being faithful to the instructions of Moses outlined in the Book of Deuteronomy. Then we hear from the political David, the man who knows from experience that *gaining* the throne and *keeping* the throne are two different things. David points out those who have shown themselves a threat to the monarchy and those who have shown themselves loyal and helpful.

Verses 13-46—Solomon gets rid of his enemies.

David tells Solomon to "act with the wisdom he possesses" (v.6). Even though Solomon becomes legendary for his wisdom, in this case, however, his wisdom involves a sort of street-smartness that leads him to kill his enemies before they kill him or cause him trouble. Adonijah, Joab and Shimei will all meet sudden death.

After his father dies, Adonijah attempts a second grab for power. He asks Bathsheba to petition Solomon if he could marry Abishag, his father's virgin concubine. Though Bathsheba seems unaware of Adonijah's scheme, Solomon sees it clearly. In asking for the hand of the king's concubine in marriage, Adonijah is subtly seeking to undermine Solomon and move forward his own claim to the throne. For this act of treason, Adonijah is executed.

Verses 12-25. We should note the privileged role of the king's mother. When Bathsheba enters the king's

court, he stands up and does her homage (v.19). In those days, it was not the wife of the king but the mother who ruled alongside the king. The king had too many wives to choose from as his queen. We might say that the role of queen mother as intercessor before the king prefigures the role of Mary as the mother of the King of Kings, as our intercessor before our King.

Verses 26-27. Abiathar the priest, is sent into exile within Israel. Next on Solomon's hit list is Joab whose death is motivated by an act of revenge for his killing of Amasa and especially of the innocent Abner (vv 28-35). Shemei, who cursed David and threw stones at him, is put under house arrest. He loses his life when he 'jumps' the terms of his restriction order (vv 36-46).

Pause: What spoke to you most in chapter 2? If you knew that death was near, what might be your last words to your loved ones?

CHAPTER 3: Solomon asks for an understanding heart

"Give your servant an understanding heart to judge your people and to distinguish right from wrong." (v.9)

The opening verses show the book's ambivalence towards Solomon. On the one hand, we are told that Solomon "loved the Lord" (v.3) thereby fulfilling the great commandment of Deuteronomy (Dt 6:5). But on the other hand, we have Solomon marrying a foreign princess and worshipping on the "high places"—two behaviors condemned by Deuteronomy.

Verses 4-15—Solomon's dream at the sanctuary in Gibeon. 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 decides to give 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 knew that the true mother of the child would sacrifice anything to protect her child.

Pause: If God came to you in a dream and invited you to ask any gift for yourself, what would you ask for?

CHAPTERS 4-5:14: A king wealthy and wise

“Solomon had twelve commissaries for all Israel who supplied food for the king and his household, each having to provide for one month in the year.” (4:7)

“For the chariot horses and draft animals also, each brought his quota of barley and straw to the required place.” (5:8)

4:1-6 list the names of officials in what we might call Solomon’s cabinet.

Just as there had been twelve sons of Jacob and twelve tribes of Israel, so now the land is divided into twelve parts. This time each is to contribute one month’s supply of provisions to the king’s household. This is the first evidence that Solomon is using the people for his own benefit. What Samuel had warned—that the king would set the people to do his plowing and his harvesting, that he would tithe crops and vineyards and flocks (1Sam 8:12,15,17)—is hereby acknowledged.

The reader will note that the editors of the *New American Bible* have rearranged several verses of the original Hebrew in chapter 5 for the sake of better order. Hence, the chapter begins with verse 7.

5:1-4 describe the magnificence of Solomon’s wealth and wisdom. The account is most likely exaggerated to give the sense that during Solomon’s reign, especially during the early years of his kingship, Israel was a major power in the region and its leader was highly respected by all his neighbors. This time in Israel’s history is described as a *golden age* due to Solomon’s wisdom, his building of the temple and his fame among all leaders of his time.

Pause: If you won the lotto, how would you spend the money? Who is the wisest person you know? Why?

CHAPTERS 5:15-7:51: Solomon builds a temple and palace

“Now that the Lord, my God, has given me peace on all sides...I propose to build a temple in honor of the Lord, my God, as the Lord predicted to my father David when he said: ‘It is your son whom I will put upon your throne in your place who shall build the temple in my honor.’” (vv 18-19)

The focus of the rest of chapter 5 and all of chapters 6 and 7 will be the construction of the temple and Solomon’s palace.

5:15-32. With the help of Hiram, King of Tyre and David’s friend, Solomon prepares to build the temple. He obtains lumber and workers from his friend. Solomon “conscripted 30,000 workers from all over Israel” (5:27). Many scholars believe that this was forced labor and that the little guys paid a huge price as Solomon undertook a huge building program. Later in 1Kings, we will discover that the resentment developing around Solomon’s building projects and lavish lifestyle will give rise to a full-scale revolution.

Chapter 6 describes the building of the temple in great detail, starting with the specific date the workers embarked on the project. Often in the Old Testament, dating is given by relating it to other significant events—in this case, the Exodus and Solomon’s accession to the throne. The magnificence of the temple is pointed out by frequent references to fine woods, finely carved stone and abundance of gold. In the midst of the detailed narrative comes the prophetic word reminding Solomon that what pleases the Lord most is *not* a temple but obedience to his ordinances and commands (vv 11-13). God is telling Solomon that there must be a connection between liturgy and life. These words are inserted as a reminder that God will never forsake his people if they are faithful to his word. As we shall see, the kings’ infidelity to God will lead to the destruction of the temple.

7:1-12 describe the building of Solomon’s palace which took thirteen years to complete, whereas the temple only took six years to build. Does this mean that Solomon cared more about the grandeur of his own house than he did for the Lord’s dwelling?

7:13-51 detail the lavish furnishings of the temple and the palace.

Pause: What is the most beautiful church or secular building that you have visited?

CHAPTER 8: Dedication of the Temple

“Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below.” (v.23)

Can it indeed be that God dwells among men on earth? If the heavens and the highest heavens cannot contain you, how much less this temple which I have built!” (v.27)

With the temple and its furnishings completed, all is ready for the building's dedication.

Verses 1-9. All the people of Israel are invited to the big occasion. The priests carry the ark in procession from its home in the city of David to its new resting place in the new temple.

Verses 10-11. Just as the Lord's glory descended on the tabernacle in the wilderness long ago, so now it descends on the temple and confirms it as a place of worship chosen by God. The 'dark cloud' implies that God is shrouded in mystery (Dt 4:11).

Verses 14-21. Solomon recalls the promise God made to David to lead Israel, but that it will not be him but his son who will build a temple for God.

Verses 22-53. Solomon's prayer. In the presence of the people, Solomon stands before the altar of the Lord and prays. The scene presents the king in his ideal role as spiritual leader of his people. At this point in his reign, Solomon relies on God alone to keep his kingdom secure. The scene presents the King in his ideal role as spiritual leader of his people. Commenting on Solomon's prayer, Fr. Timothy Schehr writes:

Solomon declares there is no other God like the God of Israel. The king fully recognizes how insignificant this great temple is before the God of all creation. Still, the king asks God to grant him and the people the favor of listening to the prayers they will address to God from this sacred place. This request that God look after the people and listen to their prayers is repeated several times in the reading.

Several times during this prayer, Solomon speaks of himself as God's servant. Perhaps the king is mindful of the advice he received from his father David to walk in the ways of the Lord (1 Kgs 2:3). Service to the Lord God was to be the distinguishing characteristic of kingship in Israel. To his credit Solomon is clearly aware of this as he makes this prayer to God. Fittingly, Solomon pleads with God to watch over the temple day and night. At this point in his reign, Solomon relies on God alone to keep his kingdom secure. It king and people remain faithful to God, they will enjoy countless blessings. Later narratives, however, reveal a shift in Solomon's thinking. He will begin making alliances with other nations and even building temples to the gods of those nations (1 Kgs 11L4-8).

Then follow seven prayer petitions which Solomon hopes very much that God will answer (vv 31-51). As

we read this part of Solomon's prayer, we see that the author of Kings wrote the prayer to help its readers cope with the loss of their land and temple. This is clearly emphasized in the seventh petition. The exiles are encouraged to repent and return to God's ways. In verse 51, the people are reminded that their ancestors were once delivered from the slavery of Egypt.

Verses 54-66. Having finished his prayer, Solomon rises from his knees and once again addresses his people. He hopes that God will continue to help him and the people follow his ways. Then huge offerings are sacrificed to the Lord. The specific amounts of these offerings are given as a way to indicate the people's participation. In verse 66, the people are dismissed and sent to their homes. Everyone goes away "rejoicing and happy over all the blessings the Lord had given to Israel."

Pause: What spoke to you most in Solomon's prayer? What is the most memorable church ceremony that you have witnessed in your lifetime?

CHAPTER 9: Promise and warning to Solomon

"God said to Solomon: 'I have heard your prayer of petition.... As for you, if you live in my presence... doing just as I commanded...I will establish your throne...forever. But if you or your descendants ever withdraw from me...and worship false gods, I will cut off Israel from the land I gave them...and this temple will be in ruins.'" (vv 3-8).

Verses 1-9—Promise and warning. The dialogue between God and Solomon continues. Solomon has spoken in prayer. Now God responds. God tells the king that the future of the dynasty and the temple depends on the fidelity of Israel's kings to their covenant with God. The conclusion is obvious: the destruction of the temple and the end of the dynasty did not occur because of any lack of fidelity on God's part. The people of Israel and their kings bear full responsibility for the fall of the two Israelite states and the exile of their people. Of course, the book wants its readers to recognize that the converse is true as well: obedience will bring God's blessing to the people and their land.

Verses 10-18 recount how Solomon conscripted his own men for his building projects and abused the men of Hiram.

CHAPTER 10: The Queen of Sheba visits Solomon

“The report I heard in my country about your deeds and your wisdom is true.” (v.6)

Chapter 10 is further evidence that God kept fully 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 is way beyond the reports she has heard.

Pause: What speaks to you most in chapters 9-10? Whom do you know personally or through the news who use their vast material wealth or wisdom to help others?

CHAPTER 11: The 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, we read that Solomon had married Pharaoh’s daughter and that he had worshipped at the “high places.”

In this chapter, we read how Solomon’s foreign wives turned his heart from following God’s ways (v.3). Solomon’s marriages to foreign women were contracted for political ends and the shrines were built for his wives and traders. Such contracts, however, jeopardized the purity of Israel’s religion which strictly forbade such marriages and the 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, it 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.

Verses 14-40—Three rivals to Solomon. 1Kings concludes the story of Solomon by mentioning his three rivals. Twice in these verses, we read the words: *“The Lord then raised up an adversary to Solomon....”* (vv 14, 23). Two threats are from outside, but the most serious one is from inside his kingdom, that is, from Jeroboam, one of his administrators (v.28).

Verses 29-39 introduce us to Jeroboam, one of Solomon’s administrators who is destined to become the king of the northern kingdom. Jeroboam encounters the prophet Ahijah who suddenly takes off his new garment and tears it into twelve pieces. He then says to Jeroboam: *“Take ten pieces for yourself; the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘I will tear away the kingdom from Solomon’s grasp and will give you ten of the tribes. One tribe will remain to him for the sake of David my servant, and of Jerusalem, the city I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel. The ten I will give you because he has forsaken me and has worshiped Astarte, goddess of the Sidonians..., he has not followed my ways or done what is pleasing to me according to my statutes and my decrees, as his father David did’”* (vv 31-33).

The prophet makes clear to Jeroboam that the rending of the Israelite nation into two kingdoms is a punishment for Solomon’s idolatry and sin. Through a symbolic action and a prophetic speech, Ahijah theologically justifies the kingdom’s division after Solomon’s death. The reality of a united twelve tribe monarchy is about to end. If Jeroboam takes ten pieces (tribes) and *one* tribe is left, the math is off. The missing twelfth tribe is most likely the priestly of Levi, a tribe which holds no land of its own. God, through the prophet, promises Jeroboam that he shall be a blessed king if he heeds God’s commands (v.38). When Solomon hears about the prophecy, he seeks to kill Jeroboam who flees to Egypt (v.40).

Pause: What are your thoughts and feelings about Solomon?