

Kings Vs. Prophets

Spoiler: God's Word Always Wins the Day



It's easy to read 1 and 2 Kings and think of it as a history of Israel. While they do tell the story of Israel and the succession of its kings, the author isn't writing just for history's sake. We know this because he quotes extensively from outside source books called the "Chronicles of the Kings of Israel." After the story of each king's reign, he says you can go read more about that king in those texts. You'll notice his references throughout your reading. Clearly, historical records of the kings already existed and the readers had access to them. However, if a historical account of the kings isn't the primary purpose of the books, what is the point of 1 and 2 Kings?

A New Paradigm

The author of 1 and 2 Kings is as much a theologian as he is a historian. He's writing a prophetic history of how the word of God in the Torah and the prophets was the true Lord of Israel's story. The books are written from the perspective of someone sitting long after the exile of the northern tribes (2 Kings 17) and the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon (2 Kings 24-25). This theological history explains why Israel and Judah are in exile—its kings and people have resisted the word of God. They've persisted in their rebellion leading all the way up to exile.

Although Israel had many kings, they were not the ultimate authority in Israel. Rather, God's covenant word was the real authority. This is why God raised up the prophetic office to counterbalance the office of kingship. For every king, there was an opposing prophet or group of prophets ready to stick the covenant back in the king's face and call him to accountability to God's word. Thus, 1 and 2 Kings might more accurately be called "1 and 2 Kings vs. Prophets." The author pits each new king against a prophet(s) to help you see that God's prophetic word ultimately determines Israel's history. It's actually the prophets and the word spoken through them that drives the books.

The Bitter Confrontations

We'll pick up the story in 1 Kings 11. By now, any hopes you had that Solomon could be the promised king of Israel to rule the nations are forever dashed. His kingdom (and his own heart!) was compromised by idolatry and injustice, eventually leading to disaster.

Enter the first prophet of the book— Ahijah.

Ahijah confirms God's word in 1 Kings 11. Solomon dies and his son, Rehoboam is a total punk. As a result, the kingdom splits into two: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. This leads to a pivotal moment in Israel. In 1 Kings 12, Ahijah speaks on behalf of God's covenant with Israel and David. He says that all of Israel's history is going to be determined by the people's responsiveness to these covenants. Would they listen to God's prophetic word? Let's see.

Rehoboam vs. Shemaiah (1 Kings 12)

Rehoboam reigned over the southern tribe of Judah but lost control of the northern tribes to Jeroboam. In 1 Kings 12 he decides to gather an army and fight for the house of Israel in hopes that his kingdom would be restored. But his plans are thwarted when the word of God comes to the prophet (or the "man of God") Shemaiah. Shemaiah confronts King Rehoboam and the house of Judah and brings this word from the Lord: *"You shall not go up or fight against your relatives, the people of Israel. Every man return to his home, for this thing is from me."* (1 Kings 12:24)

That was it. According to scripture, *"So they listened to the word of the Lord and went home again, according to the word of the Lord."* (1 Kings 12:24) Prophet one point, king zero. The word of the Lord trumped the plans of the king. It didn't matter that Rehoboam had assembled 180,000 warriors and rallied the tribes of Judah and Benjamin to fight against Israel. When the king was confronted with God's prophetic word, it prevailed.

Jeroboam vs. "A Man of God" and Ahijah (1 Kings 13 & 14)

In the north, Jeroboam had a new, big kingdom, but he also had a problem. The presence of the Lord remained in the south, so his people continually went to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices. He feared his people would wind up back under Rehoboam's rule, so he created his own worship system in the north, erecting two golden calves for the people to worship. This didn't go well for Aaron in Exodus 32, and it doesn't go well for Jeroboam here.

He is confronted twice with the prophetic word. First, in 1 Kings 13: "a man of God" opposes him at the altar in Bethel, denouncing his idolatry and announcing the end of the northern kingdom. Jeroboam tries to buy this prophet's favor, but the man of God shuts him down, refusing to disobey the word of the Lord.

Then, in 1 Kings 14, Jeroboam is opposed by Ahijah (the first prophet in 1 Kings). Jeroboam's son gets sick, so he sends his wife to Ahijah to find out what will happen. The prophet speaks on God's behalf. His son will die, but his death will be more bearable than what is about to unfold for the nation. The Lord is going to cut off Jeroboam's house because of his brazen idolatry. The prophetic word is confirmed by his son's death the minute his wife arrives home. In another showdown between a king and a prophet, the word of the prophet wins the day.

Ahab & His Family vs. Elijah (1 Kings 17 & 18)

The succession of northern kings that oppose the word of the Lord reaches a climax when Ahab takes the throne. First Kings 16 says that Ahab did more evil in the sight of the Lord than all the kings before him.

Together with his Canaanite wife, Jezebel, King Ahab institutes the worship of the Canaanite god, Baal, over Israel. His kingdom was one of radical apostasy.

God raised up Elijah, the most prominent Old Testament prophet, to confront Ahab. He quickly becomes Ahab's greatest nemesis, and we see why in 1 Kings 18. In this famous story, Elijah challenges 450 prophets of Baal to see whose God is the best. He invites the people to give allegiance to the true God, the God who answers by fire. In a dramatic demonstration of power, God consumes Elijah's sacrifice with fire from heaven, while totally embarrassing the prophets of Baal. The people fall on their faces and declare that Yahweh is the one true God.

After this, Elijah confronts Ahab's injustice again and announces the downfall of his house in 1 Kings 21. Elijah condemns his evil practices and God doesn't allow Ahab's evil and injustice to continue. Ahab dies and his house is left desolate when the northern tribes are later taken into exile (1 Kings 22). In his ongoing confrontations with Ahab, it's clear that Elijah is a prophet of the true God and the word of the Lord is powerfully at work in him.

Jehu vs. Elisha

The centrality of the prophetic word continues in Elijah and his disciple, Elisha. In fact, a large textual stretch covering fourteen chapters (1 Kings 17 through 2 Kings 9) focuses primarily on the work of these two prominent prophets. It's their prophetic activity that drives the narrative forward.

One of Elisha's more notable confrontations is with King Jehu. He anoints Jehu in 2 Kings 9 and instructs him to wipe out Ahab's house. Upon becoming king, there's a bloody battle and assassination, and the story gets pretty messy. In 2 Kings 10, Jehu destroyed Baal worship from Israel as he should have, but continues to worship Jeroboam's golden calves at Bethel and Dan! He was not attentive to the word of the Lord and he continued to lead Israel down a path of no return.

Israel was headed for disaster, and no one was to blame but themselves. The author pauses in 2 Kings 17 to make sure we know this. All the disaster that came upon the northern kingdom was a direct result of its rejection of the word of the Lord. God sent them prophets to confront and correct them, but they persisted in patterns of idolatry, injustice, and rebellion until one day they were wiped out.

Hezekiah vs. Isaiah (2 Kings 18-20)

Unfortunately, Judah was headed towards the same outcome as her big sister. God sent prophets to warn Judah against imitating the ways of Israel. King Hezekiah responded positively to the prophetic word. He removed the high places and cut down the Asherah poles. 2 Kings 18-19 says that Hezekiah held fast to the Lord and kept his commandments. When Assyrian threat came, he cried out to God for help. Through the mediation of the prophet Isaiah, God heard and responded to Hezekiah. Finally a good guy! Right? If only it were that simple. Later in his reign, Hezekiah makes some pretty foolish moves. When the superpower Babylon emerges as a world threat, Hezekiah invites Babylonian envoys into his storehouses and shows off all of his wealth. His pride makes him and his kingdom vulnerable to attack. This folly incites an oracle of judgment from Isaiah— Judah will also go into exile (2 Kings 20).

Josiah vs. Huldah

There are more bad guys, including the worst of Judah's kings, Manasseh, but we also get a surprisingly "good guy" character in 2 Kings 22. Josiah takes the throne. During his reign, the law book is discovered and read aloud. Josiah is heartbroken over Judah's sin and sends Huldah, the prophetess, to inquire of the Lord. What should Judah do?!

The prophetess says that disaster is coming upon Judah because they have forsaken God through idolatry. Josiah won't experience this disaster because of his humility and repentance, but Judah will also go into exile because of its sin. Although Josiah does renew the covenant and restore the Passover in his day, it's all just too little too late. Because of Judah's apostasy, exile is coming. It's only a matter of time until the prophetic word comes to pass.

Prophetic History vs. Modern History

Do you see how 1 and 2 Kings is really about the prophetic word of God and how it determines the course of Israel's history, leading up to exile? The prophets continue to tell the kings that if they don't repent of idolatry and turn back to God, exile is coming. When Yahweh can no longer stomach their outright rejection of his covenant, he gives them over to what the prophets said would happen all along.

But is that the final word? Is exile THE END for God's people?

What about the prophets? What happens to them now that all of God's people are exiled? Second Kings offers us a glimmer of hope. We'll see how God's story continues in exile.

It's sufficient to say that these books cause us to long for a godly king from the line of David who will keep God's word. We need a prophet who will speak God's word and a king who will uphold it. If only those two weren't at odds!

In Jesus, the offices of king and prophet come crashing together. But it's not in confrontation like the kings and prophets of 1 and 2 Kings. Rather, it's in sweet communion in a perfect prophet/king-like figure. He is both the prophet like Moses (and Elijah!) who speaks God's authoritative word and the king greater than Solomon who upholds that word. If, while you're reading 1 and 2 Kings, the continual clash between the kings and prophets causes you to ache for something or someone better, you're right on track. It's preparing you for the arrival of Jesus, the perfect Prophet-King.

Most biblical scholars emphasize that in order to interpret the writings of the biblical prophets properly, one must understand the historical context in which the prophets lived, since they were primarily addressing the people and political situations of their own day. In some cases, however, we cannot be certain when certain prophets lived and/or when their books were written. To complicate matters, the canonical order of the prophetic books (how they are arranged in our Bibles) is not the same as the historical order (when they were originally written):

Era / Century BCE	Prophetic Books [with other named Prophets]
Pre-Monarchy (13th–11th Cent.)	Books of Moses, Joshua, Judges, beginning of 1 Samuel
Early/United Monarchy (10th Cent.)	1 & 2 Samuel, most of 1 Kings [incl. Nathan & Ahijah]
Divided Monarchy (9th Cent.)	rest of 1 & 2 Kings [esp. Elijah & Elisha]
End of Northern Kingdom of Israel (8th Cent.)	Amos, Hosea, Micah, Joel?, Isaiah 1-39
End of Southern Kingdom of Judah (7th Cent.)	Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, most of Jeremiah
Babylonian Exile (597/587–520 B.C.)	some of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah 40-55
Early Post-Exilic Restoration (late 6th - early 5th Cent.)	Haggai, Zechariah 1-8; [also Ezra & Nehemiah]
Persian Era (5th–4th Cent.)	Isaiah 56-66, Jonah, Zechariah 9-14, Obadiah, Malachi, Joel?
Hellenistic Era: Ptolemies (3rd Cent.)	Daniel 1-6 (more prophetic)
Hellenistic Era: Seleucids (early 2nd Cent.)	Daniel 7-12 (more apocalyptic)

Another way to consider the prophets is vis-a-vis the Kings

Period	Northern Kings	Northern Prophets	Southern Kings	Southern Prophets
United Kingdom: under Kings Saul, David, Solomon (c. 1030 – 931 BC) <i>prophets Samuel, Gad, and Nathan</i>				
Divided Kingdom	Jeroboam (931-910 BC)	<i>Ahijah</i>	Rehoboam (931-913 BC)	<i>Shemaiah</i>
	Nadab (910-909) Baasha (909-886) Elah (886) Zimri (885) Omri (885-874) Ahab (874-853) Jehoram (852-841) Jehu (841-814)	<i>Jehu</i>	Abijah (913) Asa (911-870)	
	Jehoahaz (814-798) Jehoash (798-782) Jeroboam II (793-753) Zechariah (753-752) Shallum (752) Menahem (752-742) Pekahiah (742-740) Pekah (752-732) Hoshea (732-722)	Elijah <i>Obadiah</i> Elisha	Jehoshaphat (873-848) Jehoram (853-841) Queen Athaliah (841-835) Joash (835-796)	<i>Micaiah</i> <i>Zedekiah</i> Joel?
		Amos	Amaziah (796-767) Uzziah (790-740) Jotham (750-731)	Micah Isaiah <i>Huldah</i>
		Hosea	Ahaz (735-715) Hezekiah (715-686) Manasseh (695-642) Amon (642-640) Josiah (640-609) Jehoahaz (609) Jehoiakim (609-597) Jehoiachin (597) Zedekiah (597-586)	Zephaniah Nahum Habakkuk Jeremiah Obadiah
Babylonian Exile	(ca. 587-520 BC)	.		2nd Isaiah Jonah* Ezekiel
Post-exilic Prophets	(after 520 BC)	.	Zerubbabel, governor Nehemiah, governor	3rd Isaiah Haggai Zechariah Malachi Joel?
Hellenistic Era: [Daniel – not among the “Prophets” of the HB, but rather the later “Writings”]				