

The Power of the Prophets

Worksheet for Week 3

The Age of Kings

Last week, we looked briefly at Israel's birth – as a people and as a kingdom. As the centuries passed, the people of God came to look almost wistfully upon the time of the united kingdom of Israel as the high point of their history. David would become the great idealized king of Israel, the one with whom God had made a covenant (2 Sam 7), the king from whose line the Messiah must come. Chronicles tells the story of much the same period as the book of Kings, but leaves out much that is unflattering, such as the story of David and Bathsheba. The book of Kings¹ tells the story of nearly four centuries – from the reign of David's son, King Solomon, to the death of the kingdom of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians in the sixth century BC.

The Kingdom is Split in Two!

Solomon took the kingdom of Israel to its political and economic zenith. He used the wealth to build a great temple in Jerusalem. He expanded the borders of Israel. But he also sowed the seeds of Israel's destruction. Solomon had a thousand wives and concubines, most of whom were foreign. His wives brought the worship of foreign gods into Israel and turned Solomon's own heart away from the LORD God and toward other gods (see 1 Kings 11). Despite the building of the temple, this abandonment of the covenant between God and his people could lead only to a bad end.

The united kingdom had always struggled under the threat of rebellion and tribal warfare. Toward the end of Solomon's reign, Jeroboam, a leader among the northern tribes, led a rebellion against Solomon. Though Jeroboam was unsuccessful at the time, upon Solomon's death and some unwise decisions by his son and successor, Rehoboam, Jeroboam was able to split the kingdom in two.² The ten northern tribes followed Jeroboam, who became the first king of the northern kingdom, Israel. The largest Israelite tribe was that of Judah which, with the tribe of Benjamin, constituted the southern kingdom, Judah. Rehoboam was the first king of Judah (see 1 Kings 11 for all this).

From 1 Kings 11 forward, the book of Kings traces the history of the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. The successive kings of each kingdom are named and most get a report card from God! Most of the kings got a failing grade – they did what was evil in the sight of God (e.g., see 1 Kings 15:25). Only a few did what was right in God's sight (e.g., 2 Kings 22:1-2). Though the kingdoms would enjoy periods of peace and prosperity, both were on a path toward destruction and death.

Elijah and Elisha

In 869BC, Ahab ascended to the throne of Israel, the northern kingdom. As the writer of Kings put it, Ahab “did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him” (1 Kings 16:30). Ahab married Jezebel, a foreigner, and turned to the worship of Baal, the supreme god of the Canaanites. It is here that we meet the prophet Elijah, who intervened in the religious crisis brought on by Ahab and Jezebel. The story of Elijah's confrontation with Jezebel and with the priests of Baal is one of the great biblical narratives. In all the Bible, Elijah is the only person who does not die. Instead, he was taken to heaven in a whirlwind, riding a chariot of fire. Elijah's prophetic successor was Elisha, whose ministry to the kingdom of Israel lasted nearly fifty years, to 800BC or so.

Evidently, there was no shortage of prophets during the age of the kings. 1 Kings 22 tells of what seems to be hundred of prophets in the court of King Jehoshaphat. The entire retinue told Jehoshaphat what he wanted to hear – that the king would enjoy victory in battle. However, one prophet, Micaiah, insisted upon telling the truth – Jehoshaphat would fail. One mark of a true prophet of God was a willingness to tell the king or the entire community the truth they did not want to hear, regardless of the consequences to the prophet.

In his notes on Kings in the *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, Claude Mariottini outlines several tests that separate true prophets from false prophets. These include (1) Is the prophet willing to tell the community what they don't want to hear?, (2) Is the prophet vindicated by what actually happens?, and (3) Does the prophet lead people toward or away from worship of the one true God? Finally, “the most trustworthy prophet is the one who will seek guidance from the LORD; who will share with the community what has been seen and heard; and who will continue with the community to test and clarify the word, open always to further guidance” (p. 523).

¹ Like Samuel, Kings 1 and 2 is actually a single literary work. It was so long that it had to be put on two scrolls.

² Jerusalem had been conquered by David and made the capital of the united kingdom. Solomon built his temple in Jerusalem. When the kingdom split in two, Jerusalem, with its temple, remained the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah.

Bible Readings for Week 3

All the readings come from the stories of Elijah and Elisha. Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 1 Kings 17 We meet Elijah, who is fed by ravens and revives a dead boy.</p>	<p>Day 2 1 Kings 18 Elijah comes out of hiding and confronts the priests of Baal</p>
<p>Day 3 1 Kings 22 The prophet Micaiah stands alone and strong in the counsel of the LORD</p>	<p>Day 4 2 Kings 2 Elisha succeeds Elijah</p>
<p>Day 5 2 Kings 4 Elisha's ministry of life - he acts to bring, sustain, or restore life and avert death.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>