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INTRODUCTION TO FIRST KINGS

We are about to embark on a long journey, a journey through Israelite history. Its course runs through some of Israel's most momentous days—peaks of unbelievable glory and valleys of unforgettable despair. First Kings covers the period of Israelite history known as “the early monarchy,” the first part of the time when kings led Israel. (Second Kings, of course, treats the rest.) Like all history-writing, its focus is not upon the lives of average Israelites—farmers from Jezreel, merchants from Hebron, or soldiers posted at Megiddo. Rather, it concerns the lives of two leadership groups in Israel—the kings and the prophets.

NAME OF FIRST KINGS

The name of 1 Kings comes as no surprise. Because it treats the reigns of Israelite kings, the Hebrew Bible titled it “Kings A” (naturally, 2 Kings was called “Kings B”).¹ The Greek Bible, by contrast, listed 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, and 2 Kings in that order as four books, “1-2-3-4 Kingdoms.” By that reckoning, 1 Kings was “3 Kingdoms” and 2 Kings “4 Kingdoms.” That title captured an important truth, namely, that 1 Kings is the historical sequel to the books of 1-2 Samuel. Together the three books track the early history of Israel under the rule of kings.

1. The “A” and “B” subtitled each book with one of the first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

AUTHORSHIP OF FIRST KINGS

The book of 1 Kings neither specifies nor hints at who its author was. Thus, one must sift the book itself for clues as to his or her identity. Actually, one should probably call him the “author” rather a compiler or editor. He frequently mentions official records of both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, the sources for his work. For example, the writer cited “the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel” and its counterpart from Judah (1 Kings 14:19, 29). Also, for the reign of Solomon, he referred to an additional source, the “Acts of Solomon” (1 Kings 11:41). In addition, scholars believe that 1 Kings 1-2 (as well as 2 Sam. 9-20) draws on another ancient source, the “Court History of David.” That was a document which dealt with the reign of King David.

Finally, many scholars believe that 1 Kings actually originated as part of a larger work along with 2 Kings.² Further, they suggest that that 1-2 Kings came to completion in two editions. The first edition was finished before Judah went into exile, perhaps about 600 B.C. This would have covered the history to that day (i.e., 1 Kings 1–2 Kings 23:30). The second edition extended the history down to the end, Jehoiachin’s release (2 Kings 25:27-30). Hence, when we speak of the author or compiler, we refer to the one who finished both 1 and 2 Kings.

What clues does the book give us about that person? Access to official records implies that the author at least had some standing with the officials holding them. Thus, some Bible scholars suggest that the historian was some sort of palace official. On the other hand, though possible, the idea seems unlikely for two reasons. First, the author’s point of view is not what one would expect from a royal official. In the ancient Near East, royal writers usually wrote in praise of the kings they served, but this historian wrote as their critic. Second, royal officials probably were not the only ones with access to official documents. Thus, the use of such sources does not prove that the author was a palace official.

A second suggestion is that the writer was a priest. Several pieces of evidence support that theory. First, the author shows an

2. In addition, scholars think that 1-2 Kings concluded a major history of Israel called the “Deuteronomic history.” It included what we know as the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings.

intimate knowledge of the Temple and its workings. For example, he knows the Temple's construction in detail (1 Kings 6-7). Second, the author believed that the Temple was the only legitimate place to worship God. Hence, he disdained the worship conducted at Bethel and Dan, two shrines founded by King Jeroboam as alternatives to the Temple (1 Kings 12:26-33). Against this suggestion, however, is one key observation: prophets, not priests, dominate the book of 1 Kings. Except for Abiathar (1 Kings 1:7; 2:26-27), no priest plays a prominent role in the book. Indeed, it hardly mentions the priests at all (see 1 Kings 4:2, 4-5; 8:3; 13:33). Compare that with the importance which the book accords prophets, and the conclusion is obvious: the compiler probably was not a priest.

Hence, the final, best suggestion is that the writer was a prophet. Certainly, besides the kings, the prophets are the book's main characters. Further, they play major roles in the history. Nathan helped Solomon become king (1 Kings 1). At its end, 1 Kings has Elijah and Micaiah battling the apostasy of Ahab (1 Kings 17-21; 22:1-28). Finally, one key recurrent theme in the book is the fulfillment of prophecy.

Which prophet might have been the author? Jewish tradition credited both 1 and 2 Kings to the prophet Jeremiah (Baba Bathra 15a), and there is much evidence to commend that view. First, Jeremiah lived about the time this book was completed. Second, if Jeremiah were the author, that might explain why the book considers the prophets to be almost as important as the kings. It might also explain how, for example, the author obtained information about the lives of Elijah and Elisha. Third, the author's general outlook reminds one of Jeremiah. That is, both this author and Jeremiah understood that idolatry was the main affliction of God's people.

Finally, the fact that 2 Kings never mentions Jeremiah might hint that he was the author of 1-2 Kings. Certainly, it is striking that, as Judah neared the end of her national life, 2 Kings mentioned no prophet except Huldah (2 Kings 22). Hence, the absence of Jeremiah right where one would expect him might imply that he was the author of the books. On the other hand, if Jeremiah were the author, he would have compiled only the first edition. Since he became a prophet in 627 B.C., he probably would not have lived long enough to be involved in the second (i.e., after 561 B.C.).

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All things considered, it is probably best to leave the question of authorship open.

VIEWPOINT OF FIRST KINGS

More important than the author's identity is his viewpoint. Specifically, the author was much influenced by the book of Deuteronomy. From that book, he learned that Israel's covenant with Yahweh obliged her to obey His will. Further, Deuteronomy provided the standard by which to judge the kings' performance. In God's eyes, they either did "evil"—that is, were apostate—or did "good"—that is, were faithful to Yahweh. Also, from Deuteronomy he understood that the test of a true prophet was whether or not his prophecy came true (cf. Deut. 18:22). From Deuteronomy, he also drew his view of history, namely, that history is a sequence of events that Yahweh sovereignly guides. Because of the influence of Deuteronomy, it has been common to call the author, whatever his identity or background, the "Deuteronomist."³

In sum, he both resembles and contrasts with what we know as a "modern historian." Like any historian, he has a story to tell in 1 Kings—more than a century of Israel's national life. He has also been selective with his source materials, providing great detail in some cases, little in others. Further, he presents his material from his own viewpoint, the view of history learned from Deuteronomy. Unlike a modern historian, however, he wrote as a theologian. That is, he viewed the story from God's vantage point as revealed in the book of Deuteronomy. Further, he did not write with the cool, objective detachment of the modern historian. Rather, he wrote with the passion and zeal of a preacher. He believed the story meant something, especially for his audience. And how fortunate it is that he did. For the message of 1 Kings still speaks with great relevance for Bible readers today.

DATE OF FIRST KINGS

As noted above, 1 Kings originated as part of a larger work with 2 Kings. It provides no statement concerning the date it was

3. That also explains why the larger work of which 1-2 Kings was a part was called the "Deuteronomic history."

written. Fortunately, however, internal evidence narrows the range of possible dates down considerably. Obviously, the two books could not have been completed until after the last event they record. Babylonian records allow us to date that event—the release of Jehoiachin—to late December 561 B.C. (2 Kings 25:27-30). How far after this date, however, did the books originate? First and Second Kings omit mention of two later, important events that one would expect if the books had been written after they occurred. Certainly, Jewish exiles viewed the conquest of Babylon by Persia (539 B.C.) and the edict of Cyrus permitting Jews to go home (538 B.C.) as historically crucial to them. By implication, the books of Kings probably were complete before those dates. Had they originated later, the compiler probably would have mentioned those important events. In conclusion, 1 Kings was finished about 550 B.C. in Babylon along with 2 Kings.

Originally, the book was addressed to the people in exile. By that time they had lived in Babylon for almost forty years. They needed some explanation for why God had destroyed their land and shipped them into a foreign country. Hence, 1 Kings originally interpreted their experience and helped them see that they had suffered God's punishment for idolatry. On the other hand, it also explained that, just as God showed mercy to Ahab (1 Kings 22:27-29), so He might also show them mercy.

CHRONOLOGY OF FIRST KINGS

Two simple observations raise questions for the modern reader concerning the chronology of 1 Kings. First, the dates given for one king's reign often do not correspond with those given for others. For example, according to 1 Kings 16:23, Omri became king of Israel in the thirty-first year of King Asa of Judah and ruled twelve years. Surprisingly, however, we later learn that Omri died in Asa's thirty-eighth year (1 Kings 16:28-29). If true, that would make Omri's reign only seven years long, not twelve as claimed earlier. Second, the total years given for the reigns of kings sometimes poses a problem. For example, Rehoboam of Judah and Jeroboam I of Israel became king the same year (930 B.C.; cf. 1 Kings 12). Their descendants, Ahaziah and Joram respectively, died at the same time (2 Kings 9). Hence, one would expect the

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total years of royal reigns in Israel and Judah to be the same during that period. Unfortunately, the total is ninety-eight years and seven days for Israel, ninety-five years for Judah. A knowledge of ancient chronological practices helps illumine the problem.⁴

First, the ancient Near East had two different systems of reckoning a king's first year of rule. Mesopotamia, for example, followed the accession year method. That is, for dating purposes, the king's first year always began on New Year's day of the next calendar year. By contrast, Egypt used the non-accession-year method. That is, it counted the year of a king's coronation as a full year regardless of how many months (or even days) he actually served. Judah consistently used the accession method, whereas Israel followed the non-accession-year system at first, then switched to the other one later. As a result, some chronological problems may be solved by knowing which system of calculation was in effect.

Second, the ancient Near East had two different calendars. The one which Israel followed began in the spring (the month of Nisan), but the one which Judah used began in the fall (the month of Tishri). Hence, the combination of different calendars and different systems of reckoning make for complicated chronology. At times, knowledge of the calendar in use can explain problems.

Third, sometimes a father and son served as king at the same time. This practice was called a co-regency or shared rule. Apparently, historians included the years of co-regency in the total of years reigned by both kings. As we shall see, this idea helps explain why the total years of rule given some kings conflicts with other date information.

CHRONICLES AND FIRST KINGS

A comparison of the books of 1 Kings and Chronicles shows that they have similar content. One wonders, then, why both appear in the Old Testament. The answer is that, though similar, the books of Chronicles differ from 1 Kings in several ways. First, the books begin at a different point in time. Whereas 1 Kings starts with David's last days, 1 Chronicles opens with a series of genealogies headed by Adam. Second, 1-2 Chronicles are preoccupied only

4. The classic treatment of these chronological problems is Edwin R. Thiele's *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, rev. (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1983).

with the Davidic monarchy. Third, 1-2 Chronicles also include some information about some Judean kings that 1 Kings omitted.

Fourth, the books view the history from different perspectives. For example, 1-2 Chronicles reflect the viewpoint of a priest or Temple official. The standard for evaluating the kings is loyalty to the Temple in Jerusalem. By contrast, 1 Kings evaluates kings more on the basis of their attitude toward idolatry. That standard derives primarily from the book of Deuteronomy. Further, unlike 1 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles go to great lengths to show how much of Temple practices originated with King David. By contrast, while honoring David occasionally, 1 Kings is more concerned with tracing how idolatry took root in Israel.

In sum, though the contents of 1 Kings and Chronicles overlap, their differences are notable. Hence, just as the four gospels supplement our knowledge of Jesus, so 1 Kings and 1-2 Chronicles fill out our knowledge of the kings of Israel and Judah.

OUTLINE OF FIRST KINGS

The book of 1 Kings divides into two main parts. Each part corresponds to a major phase in the early history of the Israelite monarchy. The first section narrates the reign of Solomon over a united Israel (1 Kings 1-11). The second begins with the origin of the so-called “divided kingdom,” the division of Solomon’s Israel into two parallel kingdoms, Israel and Judah (1 Kings 11:1–12:24). The outline below represents 1 Kings’s major and minor divisions.

This outline should be consulted often by the reader to keep each successive segment of this commentary on 1 Kings in perspective. Such review is particularly important at the beginning of each new chapter of this volume that relates to 1 Kings (chaps. 2-12).

I. The Reign of Solomon (1:1–11:43)

A. His Accession (1:1-53)

1. Introduction: David’s Old Age (1:1-4)
2. The Selection (1:5-53)
 - a. The Catalyst: Adonijah’s Coup (1:5-10)
 - b. The Initiative: Nathan and Bathsheba (1:11-27)
 - c. David’s Appointment (1:28-37)
 - d. The Coronation (1:38-40)

3. The Result: Adonijah's Surrender (1:41-53)
- B. His Consolidation of Power (2:1-46)
 1. David's Dying Charge (2:1-12)
 - a. God as Priority (2:1-4)
 - b. Unfinished Business (2:5-9)
 - c. David's Death (2:10-12)
 2. Control of Opponents (2:13-46)
 - a. The Adonijah Clique (2:13-35)
 - (1) Adonijah (2:13-25)
 - (2) Abiathar the Priest (2:26-27)
 - (3) Joab (2:28-35)
 - b. Shimei (2:36-46*a*)
 - c. Summary (2:46*b*)
- C. His Reign (3:1-11:43)
 1. Internal Affairs (3:1-9:25)
 - a. Introduction (3:1-3)
 - b. God's Gift of Wisdom (3:4-28)
 - (1) The Dream at Gibeon (3:4-15)
 - (2) The Two Prostitutes (3:16-28)
 - c. The "Golden Age" (4:1-34)
 - (1) Solomon's Chief Officials (4:1-6)
 - (2) The Twelve Districts (4:7-19)
 - (3) The Good Times (4:20-28)
 - (4) The King's Wisdom (4:29-34)
 - d. The Temple (5:1-6:38)
 - (1) Hiram of Tyre (5:1-18)
 - (2) Its Construction (6:1-36)
 - (3) Summary (6:37-38)
 - e. The Royal Palace (7:1-12)
 - f. The Temple's Furnishings (7:13-51)
 - (1) The Craftsman (7:13-14)
 - (2) Two Pillars (7:15-22)
 - (3) The Sea (7:23-26)
 - (4) The Stands (7:27-37)
 - (5) The Basins and Other Items (7:38-40*a*)
 - (6) The Summary (7:40*b*-50)
 - (7) Footnote (7:51)
 - g. The Dedication (8:1-66)
 - (1) The Ark: Installation (8:1-13)
 - (2) Solomon's Speech (8:14-21)
 - (3) Solomon's Prayer (8:22-53)
 - (4) Solomon's Blessing (8:54-61)

- (5) Conclusion (8:62-66)
- h. God's Second Appearance (9:1-9)
- i. Solomon's Other Acts (9:10-25)
 - (1) His Dispute with Hiram (9:10-14)
 - (2) His Forced Labor Program (9:15-23)
 - (3) His Other Construction (9:24-25)
- 2. External Affairs (9:26–10:29)
 - a. The Royal Fleet (9:26-28)
 - b. Fame and Wealth (10:1-29)
 - (1) State Visit: Queen of Sheba (10:1-13)
 - (2) Description: His Splendor (10:14-22)
 - (3) Report: His World Stature (10:23-25)
 - (4) Report: His Chariots and Horses (10:26-29)
- D. His Condemnation (11:1-43)
 - 1. God's Announcement (11:1-13)
 - a. Solomon's Foreign Wives (11:1-8)
 - b. The Announcement Itself (11:9-13)
 - 2. Royal Adversaries (11:14-40)
 - a. Hadad the Edomite (11:14-22)
 - b. Rezon of Aram (11:23-25)
 - c. Jeroboam's Rebellion (11:26-40)
 - 3. Solomon's Death (11:41-43)
- II. The Divided Kingdom (12:1–22:53)
 - A. The Reign of Jeroboam (12:1–14:20)
 - 1. His Accession (12:1-24)
 - a. The Assembly at Shechem (12:1-17)
 - b. The Aftermath (12:18-24)
 - (1) Northern Tribes: Rebellion (12:18-19)
 - (2) Jeroboam's Coronation (12:20)
 - (3) Rehoboam's Aborted Attack (12:21-24)
 - 2. His Building Projects (12:25-32)
 - a. Fortifications (12:25)
 - b. Golden Calves (12:26-30)
 - c. New Religious Rites (12:31-33)
 - 3. His Condemnation (13:1–14:20)
 - a. Bethel's Curse (13:1-34)
 - b. Ahijah Again (14:1-20)
 - B. The Reign of Rehoboam (14:21-31)
 - 1. Summary (14:21)
 - 2. Judah's Apostasy (14:22-24)
 - 3. Shishak's Attack (14:25-28)

4. Conclusion (14:29-31)
- C. The Northern Kingdom: Jeroboam to Omri (15:1–16:28)
 1. Jeroboam's Dynasty: The End (15:1–16:7)
 - a. Judah: King Abijah (15:1-8)
 - b. Judah: King Asa (15:9-24)
 - (1) Religious Policy (15:9-15)
 - (2) War with Israel (15:16-22)
 - (3) Conclusion (15:23-24)
 - c. Israel: King Nadab (15:25-32)
 - d. Israel: King Baasha (15:33–16:7)
 - (1) Summary (15:33-34)
 - (2) Jehu's Prophecy (16:1-4)
 - (3) Conclusion (16:5-7)
 2. Period of Turmoil (16:8-22)
 - a. Israel: King Elah (16:8-14)
 - b. Israel: King Zimri (16:15-20)
 - c. Comment: Civil War (16:21-22)
 3. Israel: Reign of Omri (16:23-28)
- D. The Reign of Ahab (16:29–22:40)
 1. Summary (16:29-34)
 2. Elijah vs. Ahab (17:1–19:21)
 - a. Prophetic Proof (17:1-24)
 - b. The Big Battle (18:1-46)
 - (1) Elijah and Ahab (18:1-19)
 - (2) On Mt. Carmel (18:20-40)
 - (3) Finally, Rain (18:41-46)
 - c. The Aftermath (19:1-21)
 - (1) Flight to Horeb (19:3-18)
 - (2) Call of Elisha (19:19-21)
 3. Ahab's End (20:1–22:40)
 - a. Judgment Pronounced (20:1–21:29)
 - (1) War with Syria (20:1-43)
 - (a) Minor Attack (20:1-25)
 - (b) Major Attack (20:26-43)
 - (2) Naboth's Murder (21:1-29)
 - (a) The Murder Itself (21:1-16)
 - (b) Elijah's Announcement (21:17-26)
 - (c) Final Mercy (21:27-29)
 - b. The End Itself (22:1-40)
 - (1) Micaiah's Prophecy (22:1-28)
 - (2) The Fateful Battle (22:29-38)
 - (3) Summary (22:39-40)

- E. The Reign of Jehoshaphat (22:41-50)
 - 1. Summary and Evaluation (22:41-44)
 - 2. Other Deeds (22:45-49)
 - a. Summary (22:45)
 - b. Minor Religious Reform (22:46)
 - c. New Merchant Fleet (22:47-49)
 - 3. Conclusion (22:50)
- F. Summary: The Reign of Ahaziah (22:51-53)

THEMES OF FIRST KINGS

Throughout the book, the author took pains to stress certain key themes. First, Yahweh fulfilled His promise to David that one of his descendants would always rule Israel. Even during the Divided Kingdom, Yahweh kept a Davidic descendant on Judah's throne. Judah enjoyed a stable succession of David's heirs from Rehoboam on (1 Kings 12). That theme reminded the exiles that Yahweh was a faithful God whose word could be trusted. He kept His promises.

Second, God judged Israel and Judah because of their unfaithfulness. Tolerance of other religions led to Solomon's condemnation, the collapse of his empire, and the origin of the Divided Kingdom (1 Kings 11-12). For her part, Judah also angered Yahweh with similar apostasy (1 Kings 14:22-24). That explained to the reader that the Exile of Judah was divine punishment for a long-standing rebellion, not the result of bad government.

Most of 1 Kings, however, dwells on the apostasy that plagued the northern kingdom. Israel followed the "sin of Jeroboam," a deviant form of Yahweh-worship, which included calf-worship and substituted other worship places for Jerusalem. Under Ahab, she also gave the worship of Baal, a Canaanite god, status as an official religion. Thus, 1 Kings traced Israel's historical misfortunes to her persistent practice of those heresies.

Third, throughout the early monarchy, the word of true prophets came true. The writer contrasted them with certain false prophets, for example, the prophets of Baal and Zedekiah (1 Kings 18, 22). The contrast warned the reader to obey certain kinds of prophets and to reject all others. It also confirmed that God did keep His word, even His warnings of judgment.