

STRAIGHT TO
THE HEART OF

1 & 2 Kings

60 BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

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MONARCH
BOOKS

Introduction: The Story Behind The Story

All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the Lord their God.

(2 Kings 17:7)

We know better than to take all we see and hear at face value. We are taught from a young age that, when watching an advert or listening to a politician or reading a news story, we need to take a step back in order to spot what's really going on. We are taught to look for the story behind the story.

Take, for example, this character reference given by a man's previous employer:

I understand from David Brown that he has applied for a job at your company. I simply cannot find enough good things to say about him. I can only commend him to you as a job candidate with no qualifications whatsoever. I have never known anybody like him. His talents were wasted at our company and I frequently felt that there was nothing I could teach him. I'm sure that you will find out quickly that his true ability is deceiving. He never seemed to care how many hours were needed to complete a task, and you will be extremely lucky if you can persuade him to work at your company. I have never known a worker fired with such great enthusiasm, and I know I speak for everybody when I say that when he left us we were all very satisfied. I would encourage you to waste no time in interviewing him.

We need to remember this when we read 1 and 2 Kings. These books were written at a moment of great crisis and confusion for the Jewish nation, and they were written to reveal to them the story behind the story. The ten northern tribes of Israel had been defeated, destroyed and taken into exile by the Assyrians in 722 BC. The two remaining tribes in the south had held out longer, but they had suffered the same disaster at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 BC. This was more than a political and military defeat for them. It had brought into question all that they believed about their God. Where had he been when they needed him most? Why had he failed to rescue them from their enemies? Why had Israel's God abandoned Israel in its darkest hour?

The writer of 1 and 2 Kings sets out to answer those questions. It's significant that the Hebrew Old Testament lists them, not just as history books, but among the writings of the "Former Prophets". They are more than a mere record of the past. They are a God-given commentary on what had just happened to Israel and Judah.¹ Jewish tradition teaches that the prophet who wrote these books was Jeremiah.² All we know for sure is that, whoever the prophet was, he felt inspired by God to tell the story behind the story – from the start of King Solomon's reign in 970 BC, to the release of King Jehoiachin from a Babylonian prison in 561 BC. The writer prophesied to the Jewish exiles that these events had not befallen their nation in spite of God, but because of God. He had not been unfaithful to them. They had been unfaithful to him, and he had done all that he promised he would do to bring their nation back to him.

¹ The other books listed among the "Former Prophets" are Joshua, Judges, and 1 and 2 Samuel. The "Latter Prophets" are the seventeen final books of the English Old Testament, from Isaiah to Malachi.

² The writing style of 1 and 2 Kings is quite similar to that of the book of Jeremiah. His authorship would also explain why these books fail to mention Jeremiah – surely unthinkable for such a giant of a prophet unless a result of the author's own humility. The biggest challenge to this view is that the narrative of 1 and 2 Kings ends in Babylon, whereas Jeremiah seems to have spent his own exile in Egypt (Jeremiah 43:6–8).

The writer believed that only this prophetic commentary could revive the hopes of the despondent Jewish exiles in Babylon. If the God of Israel had been true to his promise that he would drive them into exile if they turned their backs on him, then they could also trust him to be true to his promise to restore their fortunes if they turned back to him. They could trust him to be working out his master plan in the background to bring them back to the Promised Land and to launch a glorious new chapter in Israel's story.

If all we want is a superficial history of ancient Israel, then the author says we can look elsewhere. He points us once to "the annals of King Solomon", fifteen times to "the annals of the kings of Judah" and eighteen times to "the annals of the kings of Israel". He quotes from these sources liberally, but he offers us something far more useful than a record of events as they played out on the evening news. He gives us the story behind the story.³

This explains why the writer is so selective in his prophetic commentary. King Omri of Israel was such a mighty ruler that many decades later the Assyrians still referred to any king of Israel as a "son of Omri", yet the writer dismisses his reign in six short verses – just enough space to explain that he missed out on his true calling by doing evil in the eyes of the Lord.⁴ King Jeroboam II's reign was seen as a triumphant golden age for Israel, yet the author skirts over it in just six verses, focusing instead on what the Lord was doing, often unnoticed, behind the scenes.⁵ These aren't just history books. They are a great

³ The author makes it obvious that he is quoting from these primary sources. He even preserves intact their statements that certain things remain in place "to this day" despite their having been destroyed by the Babylonians (see 1 Kings 8:8; 9:20–21 and 12:19). 2 Chronicles 5:9 takes the same approach to preserving these primary sources, despite it being written more than a century after 1 and 2 Kings.

⁴ The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III, now in the British Museum in London, refers to "*Jehu son of Omri*". Time and time again, modern archaeology has confirmed the historical reliability of 1 and 2 Kings.

⁵ By way of contrast, the author devotes thirty-eight verses to a single prayer of King Solomon – three times as much attention as he devotes to the reigns of Omri and Jeroboam II put together!

prophetic sermon that explains the story behind the story – what the Lord did to ancient Israel and Judah, why he did it, and what that means for our own lives today.

Ancient Hebrew was written down without any vowels, so the author was able to fit his whole sermon into a single book on a single scroll. When the book was translated into Ancient Greek in the third century BC, it no longer fitted on a single scroll so ever since then it has been divided into 1 and 2 Kings. Its message of hope remains unchanged.⁶

1 Kings 1–11 is all about **Father and Son**. King David hands the crown over to King Solomon. **1 Kings 12–16** is about **North and South**, as Solomon’s kingdom splits into two, and civil war breaks out between the two new kingdoms. In **1 Kings 17 to 2 Kings 8**, the theatre of war shifts to a new struggle between **Rebels and Revival**. In **2 Kings 9–17** we see the **Northern Lights** of the kingdom of Israel grow dim and finally die. **2 Kings 18–25** is about **Southern Comfort**, as the Lord rescues and revives the kingdom of Judah. Even when they reject him and are destroyed too, he continues to comfort the survivors with a promise that their story isn’t over. What has happened to them is all part of God’s far bigger plan to bless the entire world by renewing his covenant with their nation.

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So get ready for the message of 1 and 2 Kings. Get ready for the promise which breathed hope into the hearts of a bunch of Jewish down-and-outs in Babylon and which still breathes fresh hope into the hearts of its readers for the struggling Church today. Get ready for a revelation of what is really taking place in history. Get ready for the God of Israel to catch you up into the story behind the story.

⁶ To add to the confusion, when splitting Samuel into two scrolls for the same reason, the translators of the Latin Vulgate decided to refer to 1 and 2 Samuel as 1 and 2 Kings and to 1 and 2 Kings as 3 and 4 Kings! Despite these differences in how the text is divided, the text itself remains unchanged.

Yesterday's Man (1 Kings 1:1–2:12)

“Have you not heard that Adonijah, the son of Haggith, has become king, and our lord David knows nothing about it?”

(1 Kings 1:11)

The book of 1 Kings begins a bit like one of the original *Star Wars* movie. It catapults us straight into the thick of the action, and it assumes that we will quickly pick up the plot along the way. It doesn't introduce King David or tell us which prophet is writing the story. It assumes that we have read 1 and 2 Samuel, and that we therefore know all about the shepherd-boy who became king of Israel and who received a command from God to bypass his older sons and hand over his throne to his young son Solomon when he died. It expects us to know that David's eldest son Absalom attempted to defy this and was killed in his failed rebellion, making Adonijah David's oldest surviving son.¹

If you have read 1 and 2 Samuel, then you will see a lot of continuity as the plot resumes: Bathsheba is still David's favourite wife; Joab is still commander of his army; Benaiah is still the captain of his bodyguard; Nathan is still his prophet; and Zadok and Abiathar are still serving as his two priests. But what really strikes us here is the *discontinuity*. Whereas 1 and 2 Samuel celebrate the strength of King David, the giant-killer who conquered Israel's hostile neighbours, the writer of 1

¹ Adonijah was originally David's fourth son (2 Samuel 3:2–4). Absalom murdered Amnon, and Kileab evidently died in childhood. At the start of 1 Kings, Adonijah is aged about thirty-five and Solomon about eighteen.

Kings goes out of his way to emphasize King David's weakness in these opening verses.

In his first sentence he describes David as "very old" – a little harsh, we might think, for a man aged sixty-nine, but the rest of the chapter reveals how much it's true. The ancient world saw political power and sexual potency as intertwined (that's why rulers had large harems as a sign of their virility), so the writer begins by informing us that David is now more interested in hot-water bottles than hot women. Even when he is given a beautiful young woman to keep him warm at night, the days are long gone when he used to turn out the light and want to do anything more than sleep.² This detail is not incidental to the story. There was a time when the nation of Israel looked to David as its messiah, but now the writer wants us to grasp that he is yesterday's man.

One of the most famous lines in the original *Star Wars* movie comes when Obi-Wan Kenobi assures a storm trooper that the droids in question are not the ones he is looking for. The author is saying the same thing to his readers through each of these details. He tells a Jewish nation that is looking back to the reign of David as its heyday that David was never the true messiah that Israel was looking for.

Adonijah is all that David isn't. He is so handsome and virile that he rides around Jerusalem in a chariot, the path cleared before him by a muscly team of runners. David never had the courage to confront his son's sin (1:6), and even now he is oblivious to Adonijah's attempt to usurp his throne (1:18). Adonijah quickly wins over Israel's top general and its priest. His plot is only thwarted by the quick thinking of the prophet Nathan and of Solomon's mother Bathsheba. Meanwhile, the writer emphasizes David's own inactivity by using the Hebrew word *heder* in 1:15, which means *bedroom*. David is

² David died aged seventy (2 Samuel 5:4). He had many wives, so his sexual inactivity here conveys impotence rather than purity. Even Abishag's name declares his weakness, meaning *My Father Has Gone Astray*. She came from the northern town of Shunem, in the territory of Issachar, where Elisha later stayed (2 Kings 4:8).

yesterday's man, outmanoeuvred in his pyjamas. Israel needs a new messiah.

Solomon is aged only eighteen, but he looks the part. Perhaps he is the messiah that Israel is looking for. First, God has singled him out to succeed David.³ Second, he rides on the royal mule, reserved only for the kings of Israel. Third, while Adonijah holds his furtive coronation at the spring of En Rogel, some distance from Jerusalem, Solomon is crowned king in full public view at the spring of Gihon, just to the east of its city walls, because he has the full support of the dying king.⁴ Fourth, he is anointed by Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet using the sacred anointing oil from God's Tabernacle.⁵ Fifth, he is so popular that the ground shakes with such shouting that even Adonijah trembles at the news. It is laughable when Bathsheba prays in 1:31, "*May my lord King David live for ever!*", but nobody is laughing when Benaiah prays in 1:37 that the Lord will "*be with Solomon to make his throne even greater than the throne of my lord King David!*"

In 2:1-12, the contrast between Solomon and yesterday's man grows even stronger. David confesses that he has felt like a powerless pawn amid his scheming courtiers. He has never felt strong enough to deal with men like Joab and Shimei, but Solomon is strong enough now.⁶ David's dying charge to Solomon deliberately echoes the dying charge of Moses to

³ The writer assumes that we know all about this in 1:13, 17 and 30, so he jumps straight into the action of the story. God's choice of Solomon to succeed David is recorded in 1 Chronicles 28:5-7 and 29:1.

⁴ Zadok and Abiathar's sons had spied for David on Jerusalem from En Rogel during Absalom's rebellion (2 Samuel 15:27-28 and 17:17). It was far enough away from Jerusalem for furtive actions to go unheeded.

⁵ Exodus 30:25; 31:11 and 39:38. It is significant that Nathan anointed Solomon alongside Zadok (1:45), since prophets were to proclaim the Lord's choice of kings (1 Samuel 9:16 and 16:12, and 2 Kings 9:6).

⁶ We find the record of Joab's sin, Barzillai's kindness, and Shimei's sin in 2 Samuel 3:26-30; 16:5-13; 17:27-29; 19:31-39 and 20:8-10. David admitted his own weakness in dealing with Joab in 2 Samuel 3:39.

Joshua.⁷ It proclaims that Solomon is the new messiah who will finish the work that Joshua started by obeying God's commands, rewarding God's friends, dealing with God's enemies, and providing true rest for God's people.⁸ It also echoes the covenant that the Lord made with David in 2 Samuel 7:12-16. It declares that Solomon is the promised Son of David, who will build a magnificent Temple for the Lord and whose throne will endure forever.

Except he isn't. At least not fully. Did you notice the great clue that the author gives us in these opening verses that, in time, the new King Solomon will himself become yesterday's man? Read the verses again, slowly, and you'll spot that Bathsheba mentions God, that David mentions God, that Benaiah mentions God, and that even the royal courtiers mention God when they congratulate King David on his son's coronation – but the author himself never once refers to God. He wants us to see something man-made even in this moment. Solomon isn't going to be the Messiah that we are looking for.

The story behind the story in these opening verses is that Israel needs a better Son of David. It needs more than a change of ruler. It needs a change of regime. It needs one who will ride into Jerusalem on a better donkey to die a better death than David. It needs one who will rise from the dead and anoint his followers with a better oil than the one stored in the Tabernacle. It needs one who will deal out a better reward to God's friends and better judgment on God's enemies. It needs one who will never become yesterday's man. It needs the one who is hidden behind these verses and revealed to us in Hebrews 13:8: *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever."*

⁷ Deuteronomy 31:1-8. It also echoes Deuteronomy 4:29; 6:2; 8:6; 11:1 and 29:9.

⁸ 1 Kings 2:5 makes the same clear distinction as 1 Samuel 25:31 and 2 Samuel 3:30 between murdering in peacetime and killing in war. Pacifism tends to operate on the assumption that there is no distinction.