

THE BOOKS OF THE KINGS OF ISRAEL

The next two books are historical documents. They are official records from the reigns of the kings, interspersed with comments from God himself as to how He viewed their lives. They begin with King David's death and the handover of the kingdom to his son **Solomon**, and they end five hundred years later with the destruction of Jerusalem by **Nebuchadnezzar** king of Babylon in 586BC.

It was God Himself who chose the successor to David. He had promised it would be one of the sons of Bathsheba. Solomon was probably only in his twenties when he was crowned, but soon had the kingdom firmly under control. Invited by the Lord to choose any gift, he asked for wisdom to rule God's people, and thereafter became legendary for his proverbs and justice. He had inherited great wealth. Much of this was devoted to building the **Temple** on Mount Moriah, a project employing 150,000 workmen and lasting eight years. Solomon bought cedar wood and hired engineers from **Hiram** king of **Tyre**, north of Israel. They levelled off the top of the hill with a giant stone platform, on which the white limestone sanctuary and its surrounding courts stood high above the city. The design, handed on from David, was similar to the Tabernacle made by Moses, but twice the size. The Day of Dedication was turned into a national assembly. White robed priests solemnly carried the ark into the Most Holy Place, sacrifices were offered on the new bronze altar, and the young king made a long speech, asking God to bless the house they had built for him. A fiery cloud then filled the temple, the same glory of the Lord that had once dwelt in the Tabernacle in the Wilderness.

Solomon built himself a magnificent palace, south of the Temple in the City of David. He made a trade agreement with Hiram of Tyre, who had expertise in shipping, to bring spices and gold from the East into the Mediterranean basin. Later he was visited by the **Queen of Sheba** (Sheba, in South Arabia, was on the trade route from India). She brought him rich gifts and probably joined a triple alliance with Hiram to bypass the ancient monopoly of Egypt. Sadly Solomon's wisdom did not keep him from making mistakes. He married 700 wives (on average, a wedding every three weeks of his forty year reign). Many of them were foreign princesses (some no doubt were political alliances), and they persuaded him to worship their gods. The power and wealth and peace bequeathed to him by his father began to dissolve. And after his death, the united kingdom of Israel broke up.

A young leader from the tribe of Ephraim challenged **Rehoboam**, Solomon's son and successor. When Rehoboam refused to listen to a delegation asking for lower taxes, **Jereboam** led a rebellion. It split the kingdom in two. Rehoboam retained control of the south (Judah and Benjamin), but Jereboam became king of the ten other tribes. Realizing his new subjects might continue to go south to worship in the Temple, he set up a rival attraction - two golden calves, one in the north and one in the ancient holy place of **Bethel**.

"You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough", he said. "Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." 1 Kings 12:28

His psychology was unerring, and the effect was that the ten tribes from that time onward were cut off from the worship of the Lord. As a result, their moral standards slid rapidly downwards. Like a refrain, each new king is dismissed with the comment *"he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord"*. In consequence, the history of the ten-tribe kingdom is of almost unremitting bloodshed and war. Jereboam's son was murdered after two years on the throne. His successor, **Baasha**, lasted 24 years, but his son was assassinated after two years, and the killer lasted two months before he too was replaced by **Omri**, who made a new capital at **Samaria**. His son, **Ahab**, has the dubious accolade of doing more evil than all who were before him, because he married **Jezebel**, the daughter of the king of Sidon. This forceful lady persuaded Ahab's subjects to worship **Baal**, a return to idolatry unheard of since the time of the judges. She systematically eliminated all the prophets of the Lord that were left in Ahab's kingdom, and replaced them with 700 paid-up prophets of her own gods. Things looked grim

for would be worshippers of the Lord. However, this last section of 1 Kings, from chapter 17 onwards, introduces an exciting contest between the evil queen and **Elijah**, the sole survivor of God's prophets. Baal was supposed to control the weather. Elijah threw down the gauntlet. He would prove that **Yahweh** (the traditional name for the God of Israel) was the only true God. At his request God sent a three-year drought, and then, after a great show-down on Mount Carmel, sent rain again. Although Elijah's expected revolution did not happen, he was amazed to discover there were 7000 amongst the ten tribes who were still faithful to the Lord. Encouraged, he appointed **Elisha** as his young assistant, and founded 'schools of the prophets' where brave young men were trained to teach people about God.

It needs pointing out that 1 and 2 Kings are primarily concerned with the fortunes of the ten-tribe kingdom, loosely styled 'Israel'. However, they also include notes about the parallel kings in the southern kingdom of Judah, so as to keep the story in context. In fact, at this point the two dynasties become linked by a marriage between the son of **Jehoshaphat** king of Judah, and **Athaliah**, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel.

The **Second book of Kings** continues the saga, with Elisha taking over from Elijah after the aged prophet was caught away in God's chariot of fire. The Lord sent an amazing outpouring of miracles in this period, similar to those worked by Jesus and the apostles in the First Century, and for the same reason – to prove that Elijah and Elisha had been sent by Him. A leper was healed, a hundred men were fed from a few loaves, and two mothers were given back their sons from the dead. For the faithful few, persecuted and fearful, it was good to know that God was with them.

The evil introduced by Ahab and his wife was finally ended by **Jehu**, who wiped out Ahab's whole dynasty plus his son in law the king of Judah. But down in the southern kingdom Ahab's daughter immediately seized the throne, killing her grandchildren to eliminate rivals. She continued to enforce the worship of Baal until she, too, was removed by a brave coup-d'état.

Jehu's great-grandson **Jeroboam the Second** had a long reign of 41 years in the time of the prophet Jonah, for God in His mercy

“ ... saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel ... so He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash.” 2 Kings 14:26, 27

But from this point the ten-tribe kingdom went steadily downhill. In **722 BC** the **Assyrians**, a growing world power, invaded from the north and ransacked the land, deporting the whole population to the East. The judgment of God had fallen on an unrepentant nation.

“The king of Assyria captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God ... Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, ‘Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes’ But they would not listen they abandoned all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made for themselves metal images of two calves; and they made an Asherah and worshipped all the host of heaven and served Baal. And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings and used divination and omens and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking Him to anger. Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them out of His sight. None was left but the tribe of Judah only.” 2 Kings 17:6-23

The tribe of Judah also trembled under the marching feet of the Assyrian army, but their great king **Hezekiah** held them faithful to God, and Jerusalem escaped for the time being. A century later the **Babylonians** defeated the Assyrians, and king **Nebuchadnezzar** took over Judah

as a tribute-paying vassal state. By this time the spiritual state of Judah had slipped to that of the ten tribes. Captivity followed, and in **586 BC** Jerusalem with its beautiful Temple was destroyed by fire. For the time being, the Kingdom David created had come to an end.