

Kings and Prophets

What are these books?

The books of Kings were originally one book, the last part of the collection called the Former Prophets. The four books (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) were composed as a single history of Israel from Joshua's conquest of Palestine down to the Exile. They were probably divided only for convenience.

Written when and where?

In 622 BC, scrolls that are now called the Deuteronomistic Code were discovered while the temple was being renovated during the reign of King Josiah. It seems likely that the historian writing this history lived and worked during the early years of the Babylonian exile, completing it very soon after the last event recorded.

Written to whom?

Jerusalem, the sole legitimate sanctuary, had been destroyed in 586 BC, and the leading people of Judah had been exiled to Babylon. After a new king arose who was favorably moved toward a restoration, this history was written to those who would be 'going home' so that the people might have guidance—and warning.

How are the prophets involved?

Prophets, again and again, give warnings and predict disaster, and the events reported confirm their words. Primarily we will hear about Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, and Isaiah. Elijah and Elisha are especially emphasized as God's agents, showing that YHWH is Lord over all the earth.

Written for what purpose?

The question that is asked all through these books is this: "Since God made a covenant with Abraham for the land and with David for an everlasting throne, how did all of this happen to us?" The answer, over and over, is that God has not failed his people; his people, led by their kings, have failed their God.

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Rulers of the United Kingdom of Israel 1050 -> 930 BC

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Name	Saul	David	Solomon
Morality	Good / Evil	Good / Evil / Good	Good / Evil
Prophet	Samuel	Samuel / Nathan	Nathan
Scriptures	1 Samuel 8-31 1 Chron 9-10	1 Samuel 16-31 2 Samuel 1-24 1 Kings 1-2 1 Chron 11-29	1 Kings 1-11 2 Chron 1-9
	1050 BC	1010 BC	970 BC
			930 BC

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Kings and Prophets – Scripture Questions

1. After Samuel's sons turned out to be corrupt, what did the Lord tell Samuel to do? (1 Sam. 8:7, 9)
2. What kind of family did Saul have, and how does the text describe him? (1 Sam. 9:1, 2)
3. After Samuel anointed Saul, he sent him home. A week later, Samuel held a lottery. What was the result of the lottery? (1 Sam. 10:24)
4. After Saul was confirmed as king, what did Samuel say to the people? (1 Sam. 12:24)
5. What was the result when Saul took over Samuel's duties to offer a sacrifice? (1 Sam. 13:13, 14)
6. How did Saul follow God's command to utterly destroy the Amalekites? (1 Sam. 15:8, 9)
7. After Saul was confronted by Samuel, he repented. What did Samuel say to him? (1 Sam. 15:26-29)
8. What happened to Saul? Who was sent to soothe him? (1 Sam. 16:14, 19)
9. When did Saul become afraid of David? What did his fear cause? (1 Sam. 18:28 29)

The United Kingdom, ca. 1050 – 930 BC

The "golden age" of Israel in the holy land throughout the Old Testament. After Saul was anointed by the prophet Samuel, he established his kingdom. This lasted until his army captain David was blessed by Samuel and ascended to the throne, through Solomon's inheritance and consolidation of the kingdom.

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Kings and Prophets – What did it mean to them?

The Hebrew bible was written between the 10th and 4th centuries BCE, at a time when the ancient Near East empires had organized themselves into centralized government system. They were usually ruled by a monarch who was believed to have the authority of their local gods. Sometimes, smaller vassal nations or groups of people were allowed to have their own rulers as long as they kept the treaties. If they didn't, there were consequences ranging from higher taxes to destruction. The kingdoms of Israel and Judah developed in the shadows of these kind of empires, lasting about 400 years.

The writers of the Former Prophets (which includes Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings) describe the fall of Israel and Judah as divine punishment. The kings were seen as vassals to the God of Israel, “the king of the earth.” The covenants God made with their ancestors contained the laws the kings were expected to follow. Throughout Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, the kings are mostly failures. Some of the kings were successful in the non-sacred parts of the world, but even these kings had simple biographical words from the writer: they “did evil in the sight of the Lord.” Kings are warned repeatedly to turn back from their wicked ways, to return to faithfulness toward God. Most of them didn't and they are blamed for the final destruction and loss of the kingdoms.

After the destruction of the kingdoms, groups of Israelites and (later) Judahites were forced into exile. They were horrified by the end of the supposedly eternal Davidic dynasty. Two generations later, when they return, they longed for the monarchy to be restored. The writers who developed the Hebrew bible told them a history which promised a perfect and righteous king—a messiah—who would serve God faithfully, act justly, and lead the people into a new age of independence.

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Kings and Prophets – Application questions

1. Why did the Israelites want a king? What was wrong with their reasoning? What did God want for them instead?
2. What does God look for in human leaders? List godly leadership attributes.
3. Why did God withdraw his spirit from Saul? What could Saul have done differently? How could Saul have reconciled with God?

6 Kings and Prophets – Scripture Questions

1. After the first time King Saul decided to kill David, who talked him into forgiveness? (1 Samuel 19:6)
2. In spite of Jonathan’s intervention, what did Saul do? (1 Samuel 20:33)
3. When Saul learned that David had received aid from Ahimelech the priest, what did he command his guards to do? (1 Samuel 22:17, 18)
4. How was Saul prevented from capturing David in the wilderness? (1 Samuel 23:27, 28)
5. How did Saul react when he learned that David did not kill him when he had the chance? (1 Samuel 24:16-22)
6. A great force of Philistines (with David in their midst) came up against Saul. Who did Saul try to conjure up, to give him help? What was the result? (1 Samuel 28:15-20)
7. Saul’s last battle against the Philistines went very badly. What happened to him and his sons? (1 Samuel 31:2-7)

The Philistines desecrated the bodies of the dead and put them on display to intimidate their enemies—a familiar practice among ancient armies. Astarte is a local goddess who was associated with war as well as fertility. The Philistines placed Saul’s armor in her temple as a thanksgiving offering.

Kings and Prophets – What did it mean to them?

Samuel was a bridging person. His life covered the last period of judges, the first king, and the rise of David. The book(s) that bear his name emphasize several themes: the beginning of kingship in Israel; the concerns over kingship and covenantal loyalty to God; the art of the covenant as representing God's presence; the choice of Jerusalem as "the City of David"; the Davidic covenant with the messianic themes; David's adultery and its consequences.

The history happens roughly over the 11th century BC, when no superpower was interested in Palestine. The major enemy faced by Israel as they consolidated and became a strong local power were the Philistines, a sea people who had settled on the Mediterranean coast and ruled over that coast from their five major cities (Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron). Their influence was a big reason for the desire of the Israelite tribes to become unified and gain a monarchy.

The prophetic tradition in Israel, represented by Samuel and Nathan, served as a constant reminder that kings were NOT above the law. Israel did indeed reject being ruled directly by God, but the role of the king was to mediate Yahweh's rule in Israel, to lead God's people in obedience to Yahweh. In the ancient Near East the king both 1) stood in for them at all times as their representative to god, and 2) represented the deity to his people. This is why Jesus' kingship is so important in the New Testament.

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Kings and Prophets – Application questions

1. Jonathan is torn between loyalty to his father, King Saul, and loyalty to his best friend David (God's choice for the next king). What should we do as Christians when we find ourselves with divided loyalties?
2. How do we know when God is trying to discourage us from taking a certain path? What should we do about it?
3. Saul ended his life making very poor choices. What should we do when we realize we've made horrible mistakes?

Kings and Prophets

David (reigned 1010-970)

Prophets: Samuel and Nathan

Scripture: 1 Samuel 16-31, 2 Samuel 1-24, 1 Kings 1-2, 1 Chronicles 11-29

Associated works: David is listed as the author of 73 of the Psalms, and probably wrote more.

Summary:

- Religiously devout
- Militarily successful
- David enjoyed God's favor throughout most of his life (with the clear exception of his actions toward Bathsheba and Uriah)
- His conquests established Israel's empire as a unified power across the region
- It was David's wish to build God's temple, but God denied him on account of the blood he had spilled.

Kings and Prophets – Scripture Questions – David part 1

1. In this first introduction of David, what is he doing, and how is he described? (1 Samuel 16:11, 12)
2. In the second introduction of David, how is he described, and what effect does he have on Saul? (1 Samuel 16:18, 23)
3. In the third introduction of David, what is the situation in Israel? What did David volunteer to do? (1 Samuel 17:32)
4. After the battle, what song was sung that infuriated King Saul? (1 Samuel 18:7-9)
5. When Saul tried multiple times to kill David, to where did he escape, and with whom? (1 Samuel 19:18)
6. What did Jonathan do to prove his friendship with David? (1 Samuel 20:17)
7. While David is on the run, how does the priest Ahimelech assist him? (1 Samuel 21:6-9)
8. Who were the people that joined David in the cave of Adullam? (1 Samuel 22:1, 2)
9. Whose advice did David take when Philistines were robbing the Israelites? (1 Samuel 23:1-5)
10. What did David refuse to do when Saul was at his mercy? (1 Samuel 24:4-7)

Ancient Near Eastern peoples worshiped many gods and often made images of them to place in their temples and houses. Both biblical and archaeological evidence confirm that the ancient Israelites worshiped gods other than YHWH, the god of Israel, even though many passages condemn such practices.

Kings and Prophets – What did it mean to them?

Internal evidence makes it seem that 1 Samuel is more of a literary, religious, and political document rather than a simple historical report. There are quite a few repetitions and interruptions. The point is not to report events, but instead to lift David up as the true and right king, one who is obedient to YHWH.

Samuel is a prophet and priest who also serves as the final regional and pre-king leader, or judge, among the tribes of Israel. His main role is as a prophet who intercedes between God and the people.

Eventually, God chooses to replace Saul (the first king) with David, who is the youngest of his family but a brave shepherd and warrior who can outwit any predator. The story shows David as a young boy from lowly beginnings who slays an evil villain and rises to the height of power: a stereotypical underdog story! Samuel tells many ways in which David evades assassination attempts. The themes of deception and (dis)loyalty run throughout these narratives. The issue of moral responsibility for killing comes up, since multiple characters kill others for religious, military, or personal reasons.

The stories of David in 1 Samuel are, for the most part, positive. They emphasize his bravery, his loyalty, his leadership qualities, and his devotion to following (and listening to) God through the prophets. The narratives are building him up as the ideal king, even though there will be later stories that expose his all-too-human side. David becomes, in fact, the gold standard for kings, so much so that later kings in the books will be compared to him.

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Kings and Prophets – Application questions

1. How does God measure people? Looks? Influence? Education? Speaking ability? Why does this matter?
2. Which one of David's 'origin stories' do you prefer? What do they tell us about David's character?
3. David gets unjustly scolded by his older brother in 1 Samuel 17:28, 29. Why do you think there were sibling rivalries in David's family? How do we get past situations like this in our own families?

Kings and Prophets – Scripture Questions – David part 2

1. Abigail saved her household from David's punishment over Nabal's rudeness. What happened to her after Nabal died? (1 Samuel 25:39)
2. The Philistine leader Achish believed David was loyal to him, but in deference to his generals he sent David away before a battle at Jezreel. What did David and his men find when they arrived at Ziklag? How did David react? (1 Samuel 30:3, 17-20)
3. How did David react to the news of the death of Saul and Jonathan? (2 Samuel 1:11-16)
4. From whom did David seek advice after mourning the loss of Saul and Jonathan? What happened when he followed this advice? (2 Samuel 2:1-4)
5. Abner, Saul's army commander, set up Saul's son as king over Israel. How long did Ishbosheth reign while David was king over the house of Judah? (2 Samuel 2:8-11)
6. Abner was the power behind the throne of the house of Saul. He finally had enough of Ishbosheth and made a treaty with David. Who killed Abner, and why did he do it? (2 Samuel 3:27)
7. Ishbosheth was betrayed and killed by his captains. How did David respond to their 'gift'? (2 Samuel 4:8-12)
8. Who accepts David as king over all Israel and Judah? (2 Samuel 5:1-5)
9. After David took control of Jerusalem (Zion), what did the Philistines do? (2 Samuel 5:11-12, 18-25)

Kings and Prophets – What did it mean to them?

One of the gifts that these histories give us is of different viewpoints of the protagonists. The stories from 1 Samuel about David are generally positive, emphasizing his bravery, his loyalty, his ability to lead others. In 2 Samuel, the stories are more complicated. We see him as a successful warrior and we see him as morally flawed. The variety of these stories makes him more human, and it gives examples of a person who, though committed to following YHWH, is nevertheless unable to live perfectly. This sets him up as the flawed version of what it to come. Jesus, who is called the Son of David, is thoroughly committed to God, and he does live perfectly. While the readers/hearers of these histories could not know of Jesus, they did know of the promise of a Messiah. In their sadness over their loss of a homeland, they needed the reminders that 1) there had been a king who loved God but failed as a flawed person, and 2) someday a king would come who would fulfill all the prophecies and be a bridge between a lost people and their God.

One of the consistent themes in these histories is that the King was the intermediary between God and his people. When the king was faithful, God blessed the land and people. When the king was unfaithful, the land and the people suffered. We are not accustomed to this way of thinking, but for the original readers/hearers of these narratives it was assumed to be true. In our religious tradition, we generally hold that each person is responsible for their own obedience to God. It might be a good idea if we thought more communally about our faithful lives.

Kings and Prophets – Application questions

1. David gets unjustly scolded by his older brother in 1 Samuel 17:28, 29. Why do you think there were sibling rivalries in David's family? How do we get past situations like this in our own families?
2. David often sought God's advice before making important decisions. How do we keep from "wasting God's time" with trivial requests and prayers?
3. Many people around David seemed to be motivated by revenge and getting "even" with others. Is it important to do things for the right reasons and motivations? Why?

Kings and Prophets – Scripture Questions – David part 3

1. What did David want to bring back to Jerusalem? What happened to it, and why did David wait to actually get it to Jerusalem? (2 Samuel 6:1-12)
2. David was told by the Lord that he wouldn't be building a temple for the Lord. What was the promise that the Lord gave to David? (2 Samuel 7:11-16)
3. What did David do instead of going to war in the springtime? (2 Samuel 11:1-4)
4. When Bathsheba became pregnant, what did David do to her husband? (2 Samuel 11:5-17)
5. How did the Lord feel about this sin? (2 Samuel 11:27)
6. The Lord sent Nathan to tell of the Lord's anger against David. What was the punishment David (and his family) would have to endure? (2 Samuel 12:10-14)
7. What terrible thing happened to Tamar? How did David react? (2 Samuel 13:1-15)
8. How did Absalom deal with his brother? (2 Samuel 13:29)
9. In a further punishment to David, what did Absalom do? (2 Samuel 15:5-17)
10. David sent his friend Hushai to spy on Absalom. What did he hear Ahithophel advise Absalom to do? (2 Samuel 16:16-23)

Kings and Prophets – What did it mean to them?

David has made Jerusalem the political and administrative center of his kingdom; now he needs to make it an important religious center as well by bringing the ark, the symbol of God's presence, into the city. This would establish David's status with the priesthood and strengthen his control over the tribes. This ark was the one built to contain the tablets with the words from God, and it accompanied the tribes as they wandered the desert. There is a back and forth about the 'house' that David wants to build to house this ancient relic.

Nathan is introduced as David's prophet. The word 'prophet' comes from a Greek word meaning 'one who speaks for another.' In our Bible, the prophet is usually understood to be speaking for God. Here Nathan tells David that God is the one that will make the decision about the place for the ark. God promises David that God will build a 'house'—that is, a dynasty, for David. This Davidic covenant is promised forever. We know that the Babylonian invasion of the sixth century BCE destroyed the Davidic dynasty, which led to the messianic expectation that a messiah, an "anointed one" like David, would arise. This prophecy was fulfilled by Jesus, who is openly called the "son of David".

Perhaps David became complacent about his successes and his relationship with God. At any rate, he uses his position of power to take Bathsheba. The word "shakav" is used to describe what he did, and while there is no indication of rape (like Amnon with Tamar) the power imbalance between them left her little to no choice. This crime of David's marked the end of his upward trajectory and ushered in family trouble and conflicts for the rest of David's reign.

Kings and Prophets – Application questions

1. David was doing great things as king: paying attention to what the Lord wanted, winning battles, bringing the tribes together. Then he failed spectacularly, bringing trouble on his family and the kingdom. What lesson or warning can we take from his example?
2. Some sins have permanent consequences, even if there is forgiveness. How much help should we give to someone who is suffering from their own bad decisions?
3. David stood by and didn't punish his son for raping his sister. Later, he didn't punish another son for murdering his brother. Were there things David could have done differently? What would you have done?

Kings and Prophets – Scripture Questions – David part 4

1. Why did Absalom like Hushai's plan to defeat David better than Ahithopel's plan? (2 Samuel 17:14)
2. What did David want for Absalom? Who knew about his wishes? (2 Samuel 18:4)
3. After the battle with Absalom was over, what did the armies do? (2 Samuel 19:10, 14)
4. When David realized his sin, what did he ask the Lord? (2 Samuel 24:17)
5. After David was old, how did his officials try to keep him comfortable? (1 Kings 1:3, 4)
6. Which son of David next tried to take over the kingdom? (1 Kings 1:6)
7. Who warned David that Adonijah was trying to usurp his power? (1 Kings 1:11)
8. What promise did David keep to Bathsheba? (1 Kings 1:30)
9. Before he died, how did David advise Solomon? (1 Kings 2:3, 4)
10. How did David want Solomon to punish his remaining enemies? (1 Kings 2:5-9)

Kings and Prophets – What did it mean to them?

In spite of internal troubles (caused by David himself), at the end of his life there was peace and unity. He had defeated or made peace with the surrounding nations. He had centralized worship in Jerusalem, bringing there the ark. This sacred box focused the covenant made between Yahweh and Israel at Sinai, and plans were made to build a temple. The promises to Abraham, made centuries earlier, were joined with promises to David that his throne was established for ever.

We know now, of course, that only a few generations later all would be lost: the people would be in exile, the kingdom in the hands of a foreign king, Jerusalem itself in ruins, the temple razed. In the next few weeks we will read and think about what brought about these losses.

It is important to remember the position that kings had in the ancient near east. The king was considered both the embodiment of his people (that is, he stood in for them at all times as their representative) and the representative of the deity for the people (the Davidic king was called “God’s Son”). This is why Samuel and Kings tell the story of Israel almost exclusively as the story of their kings, and why the king speaks for the people.

The role of David in the biblical story is important, because in the end it is David’s greater Son who comes as the true embodiment of God’s people while also, as the true Son of God, representing God to those who believe in him.

Kings and Prophets – Application questions

1. The fallout from David's sin keeps coming! It causes, among other things, a division between those who serve David and those who serve the sons who want to be king. How much of a problem does loyalty to different leaders in the church cause?
2. The division between the Israelite army and the Judahite army foreshadows the breakup of the kingdoms later on. Congregations and denominations break up over many things today, even though Jesus called for unity. Do you think these kind of breakups are sinful? Why or why not?
3. At the end of his life, David has both good and dubious advice for Solomon. If you were asked to give one piece of advice to a leader in our church, what would it be?

Solomon (reigned 970 - 930)

Prophet: Nathan

Related scripture: 1 Kings 1-11, 2 Chronicles 1-9

Credited with authoring the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, at least two of the Psalms. Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, among other great buildings, but these were built using what amounted to slave labor. While Solomon is called wise and devoted, he ruined his name through marriages to pagan women and sacrifices to their deities. Because of his failure to live up to his commitment to the Lord, God saw fit to divide the kingdom.

Kings and Prophets – Scripture Questions – Solomon part 1

1. What bad news did Adonijah receive while he was celebrating naming himself king? (1 Kings 1:43)
2. What did Solomon ask God to give him? What did Solomon receive? (1 Kings 3:9, 12-13)
3. After Solomon solved the problem of the baby, what did the Israelites think? (1 Kings 3:28)
4. What sort of relationship did Solomon have with King Hiram of Tyre? (1 Kings 5:12)
5. What promise did the Lord make to Solomon? (1 Kings 6:12-13)
6. How long did it take to build the Temple? How long to build Solomon's palace? (1 Kings 6:38, 7:1)
7. What did Solomon have put into the new temple? What was inside this artifact? (1 Kings 1, 2, 9)
8. As the one standing between the people and the Lord, what did Solomon ask of the Lord? (1 Kings 7:29, 30)
9. This section sounds like a written prayer by the historian who compiled the book of Kings. What did Solomon, and the historian, want from the Lord when the people's sin had brought them into captivity? (1 Kings 8:49-50)
10. What was Solomon's final reminder and prayer for the people? (1 Kings 57-59)

Kings and Prophets – What did it mean to them?

The book of Kings is not exactly history as we know it. The writer has taken source material, often putting in their own creative elements, to tell a story with a message. This story is of Israel and Judah from a very particular perspective, speaking to people in exile. Taken all together, the work shows Israel's past as a cycle of disobedience to YHWH's commands, especially in regards to worship and repentance.

The end of the northern kingdom and destruction of Jerusalem shook the bedrock of the people. So many questions: should the people continue to trust YHWH? Did YHWH fail? Was the god of the Babylonians (Marduk) more powerful than YHWH? Did the nation fall because of disobedience to the covenant with YHWH?

Kings answers these questions. Jeroboam's institution of shrines in the north was the main reason for the fall of the northern kingdom. The kingdom of Judah (and David's dynasty) fell because of the failure to get rid of religious practices other than the worship of YHWH alone.

Stories of the prophets are woven into the narratives of the kings, and these prophets are used to emphasize the book's theological vision. The prophets' role was to transmit YHWH's commands. The role of the kings was to follow these commands. The success—or failure—of the nation was bound up in how the kings followed YHWH. Ultimately, the suffering of the people was laid at the feet of the king.

Kings and Prophets – Application questions

1. Solomon may have expected to be king after David, but no doubt it didn't happen exactly the way he had envisioned it. Adonijah was certainly surprised and disappointed! How do we cope with disappointment when our wishes or hopes are dashed, or are answered in unexpected ways?
2. The historian/writer repeats, several times, that God would keep his promises IF the people were obedient to his commands. Why do you think his people failed to do this? Why, in general, do we tend to forget our obligation to live the way God wants us to live?
3. For the ancient near east people, it was the king's responsibility to live in a worthy manner so that their god would be pleased and bless them. As people who follow Christ as king, we feel that it is a personal responsibility to live in a worthy manner. Should we be trying to please God so that he will bless us?

Kings and Prophets – Scripture Questions – Solomon part 2

1. What was the condition to the promise that someone from David's dynasty would always be king of Israel? (1 Kings 9:4, 5)
2. How did Solomon treat the Israelites versus the way he treated the descendants of foreigners who lived in Israel? (1 Kings 9:20-22)
3. How often did Solomon worship at the Temple he had built? (1 Kings 9:25)
4. What sort of encounter did Solomon have with the Queen of Sheba? (1 Kings 10:4, 5)
5. How did Solomon live when he was king? (1 Kings 10:18-25)
6. Did Solomon stay faithful to God? (1 Kings 10:5, 6)
7. What was the result of Solomon's unfaithfulness? (1 Kings 10:9-11)
8. Who were the three people named that rebelled against Solomon? (1 Kings 11:25, 26)
9. What promise did Jeroboam receive from the prophet Ahijah? What happened to him? (1 Kings 11:31, 40)
10. How long did Solomon reign in Israel? Who followed him as king? (1 Kings 11:42-43)

Kings and Prophets – What did it mean to them?

Exiles in Babylon would look back on the era of Solomon’s reign with longing, seeing it as the golden era of their people. The writer says to them, yes, there was much that was wonderful (the descriptions of the temple and palace are sumptuous!) but look below the surface: there was something more important than wisdom and wealth, and here Solomon failed. He did what was expected—publicly. But he failed to obey Yahweh in other areas of his life. Remember Jesus’ words in Matthew 16:26: “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”

One thing the book of Kings makes clear is that the worship of Yahweh in the temple and confidence in David’s dynasty were separated from the actual lifestyles of the kings and the people of Israel. The covenant relationship between God and his people was supposed to direct and affect the way the people lived, but in fact this covenant was mainly a ritual to be followed. As the historian/writer pointed out, this neglect (especially on the part of the kings) was a direct reason for the destruction of the nation.

Solomon was not just pragmatically adopting worship of other gods. It is hard to believe that he believed in any of them. More likely, it was politically expedient to follow rituals that made others satisfied with him. The descriptions in Kings 10 and 11 make it clear that he was politically skilled and very pleased with the accumulation of wealth and consumption. Jesus spoke of the impossibility of serving both God and money (Luke 16:13). It is very easy to see today the results of embracing the god of money, the quest for wealth and power. This greed makes itself clear in social and economic disruption, both in the lowest part of our world and the highest. When humanity falls short of what God desires for the world, disaster follows, both on the community and individual level.

Kings and Prophets – Application questions

1. On the face of it, the description of Solomon makes him look extremely successful. We've been warned that success as a believer is not shown by material goods, so how do we measure success? How do we know if we are 'doing' Christianity right?
2. Just like the exiles reading about Solomon's reign, we all have 'good old days' that we look back on with fondness—or with longing for them to return. Why do you think we do this? Is there value in this longing, or should we focus more on the future?
3. God wanted his people to worship and follow him, be obedient to him. Their allegiance to God was supposed to come before their allegiance to the king. What can we do to make sure we don't fall into this same trap, of putting rulers before God in our loyalty and obedience?

The Divided Kingdom, ca. 931-586 BC

Before Solomon's death, his servant Jeroboam rebelled. Though the rebellion itself was a failure, Jeroboam returned after Solomon's death, when Solomon's son Rehoboam reigned, and laid claim to the northern kingdom of Israel. The smaller southern kingdom of Judah (which included Jerusalem) remained under Rehoboam. So began the period of the divided kingdom.

Kingdom of Judah (Southern Kingdom)

Rehoboam (reigned 931-913)

Claim: Son of Solomon

Prophet: Shemaiah

Scripture: 1 Kings 12 & 14, 2 Chronicles 10-12

Notable for: Dividing the kingdom

Evil or good? Evil (he "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord")

Kings and Prophets – Scripture Questions – Divided Kingdom Begins

1. After Rehoboam was crowned king, what did Jeroboam and the leaders of the tribes of Israel request? What was Rehoboam's answer? (1 Kings 12:1-5)
2. What sort of advice did Rehoboam receive? (1 Kings 12:6-11)
3. Whose advice did Rehoboam take? What did the Israelite leaders say in response? (1 Kings 12:12-16)
4. Who was left for Rehoboam to rule? (1 Kings 12:19, 20)
5. How was Rehoboam stopped from going to war against the northern tribes? (1 Kings 12:21-24)
6. Who joined Rehoboam in Judah? Why did they join him? (2 Chronicles 11:13-17)
7. Who attacked King Rehoboam after several years into his reign? According to the prophet Shemaiah, why was this allowed to happen? (2 Chronicles 12:1-6)
8. The Lord accepted Rehoboam's repentance, but still allowed Judah to be punished. What happened to them? (2 Chronicles 12:7-12)
9. What sort of relations did Israel (the ten northern tribes) have with Judah (the two southern tribes)? Who succeeded Rehoboam? (2 Chronicles 14:15, 16)

Kings and Prophets – What did it mean to them?

There is a pattern in Chronicles of prophetic judgment, humility on the part of the offenders, and divine preservation. It seems likely that the historian/writer expected his readers (Israel in exile) to pay attention: abandoning the worship of YHWH is to invite ruin, but the Lord will be merciful to those who humble themselves. Suffering will still occur, but the people will be saved. Rehoboam did not set his heart to seek the Lord, and he and his people suffered because of this failure.

One of the punishments that Rehoboam and his kingdom suffered was an invasion by Egypt. Pharaoh Shishak (who reigned ca. 945-924 BCE) is documented in a Karnak inscription. His dominance is also seen in a stone pillar found at Megiddo. During this time period, Egypt was less wealthy, so Shishak's ambitions may have been at least partly inspired by the known wealth of Solomon's temple. Also, we know from previous records in 1 Kings that he had a long-term relationship with Jeroboam and so may have been aiding his ally. Shishak was originally from Libya, so including them and the oft-accompanying Cushites (sometimes translated as 'Ethiopians') makes sense.

The exiles reading/hearing these accounts would be familiar with the idea of divine retribution. Most biblical authors (at least in the Old Testament) used this theme—the idea that God punishes in response to wrongdoing. Oddly enough, this idea that God causes suffering because of human wrongdoing has a certain amount of logic. If you believe in this idea, then you have a certain amount of control: if you change your behavior, then it is possible to regain God's favor. This is a kind of transactional behavior. It is very human, and is one reason we find it so difficult to accept unearned grace.

Kings and Prophets – Application questions

1. Advice columnists are really popular! Many of us enjoy reading the questions and coming up with our own answers. Rehoboam at least asked for advice in a hard situation, even if he took the wrong advice. Who do you go to when you have hard questions?
2. Divisions are almost always painful, even if they seem necessary. Have you ever been part of a group that split? Did it go well, or badly? How did you choose which side to join?
3. Ancient peoples (and some people now) think that when bad things happen, that it is a punishment from God. What do you think?

Kings and Prophets – Scripture Questions

1. After King Rehoboam of Judah were Abijam (3 years) and Asa (41 years), then Jehosaphat. What does the historian say about Jehosaphat? (2 Chronicles 17:3-9)
2. After King Jeroboam of Israel were Baasha (24 years), Elah (2 years), Zimri (2 weeks!), then Omri. What does the historian say about Omri? (1 Kings 16:24-28)
3. One of the most (in)famous kings of Israel now takes the stage. What is the opening description of Ahab? (1 Kings 16:29-33)
4. Next we have the introduction of one of the most famous prophets of the Old Testament, Elijah. What is the relationship between Elijah and Ahab? What must Elijah do to stay safe? (1 Kings 17:1-9)
5. Elijah is out of Israel, sent by the Lord. What miracle is performed to keep him and his hostess fed? (1 Kings 17:10-16)
6. What is the next miracle performed by Elijah? What does the widow conclude? (1 Kings 17:17-24)
7. In the third year of drought, which faithful Israelite meets Elijah? (1 Kings 18:3-8)
8. How does Obediah feel about Elijah's request? (1 Kings 18:9-16)

Kings and Prophets – What did it mean to them?

While we tend to think of the ancient Israelites and Judahites as primarily YHWH worshippers, archaeological evidence (and reading between the lines in the history of Kings/Chronicles) seems to indicate that the normal default was polytheism. There were, certainly, attempts to force exclusive worship of YHWH, especially around Jerusalem, but these didn't last long—at least until the exile. It seems likely that the Israelites had their own pantheon (especially in the Northern Kingdom), with YHWH as the leading member of the deities. In some of the neighboring kingdoms, 'Baal' was also known as Hadad, and he was under the authority of El. El was the ultimate king and creator. Some researchers believe that El became conflated with YHWH, especially in the Northern Kingdom.

Just like today, there were competing variations of belief. And it wasn't just a collection of abstract ideas and beliefs: real resources and wealth were deeply involved. Offerings were not just gifts to a deity, but a form of payment that the priests received. Ancient temples were involved in finance and trade, used and traded in enslaved labor, and served as treasuries. From a practical point of view, centralizing the worship of YHWH in Jerusalem meant concentrating and funneling resources and money to one establishment and one location. Given the difficulty in maintaining control over land and people that both kingdoms struggled with, having a local temple which was a source of funding became very important to the rulers.

Focusing the exiles on the importance of following only YHWH was an important thread for the historian/writer. Having this document relating to the history of the kings and prophets available became an integral part of this focus.

Kings and Prophets – Application questions

1. Obediah was trapped between two principles. He had done what he could protecting the Lord's prophets, but he was obligated to obey Ahab as king. Elijah, however, had spiritual authority on his side: so Obediah chose civil disobedience. In our country we have had many examples of civil disobedience, and they all brought consequences to those who participated in this disobedience. How far are you willing to go to oppose what you feel is wrong? What is our responsibility towards those who disagree with us?
2. King Omri of Israel is one of the few kings with extra-biblical, historical evidence. He was, according to most accounts, very successful. He became powerful and rich. The historian seems to not care about any of this, mainly detailing his failure to honor and obey the Lord. Bearing in mind that our spiritual ruler is Jesus, what sort of attitude should we have toward those people who have civil responsibilities in our communities?
3. The miracles of Elijah are very intimate, aimed at this one widow in a foreign land. Why do you think the historian felt this was an important story for the exiles to know?

Kings and Prophets – Scripture Questions

1. Ahab accused Elijah of ‘troubling’ Israel. What was Elijah’s answer to Ahab? (1 Kings 18:18)
2. How did Elijah challenge the Israelites who came to see the contest? (1 Kings 18:21)
3. What did Elijah say to the prophets of Baal when there was no answer to their ritual? (1 Kings 18:27)
4. What did Elijah do first to prepare for his part of the challenge? (1 Kings 18:30-32)
When the Lord’s fire fell on the sacrifice, what did the people say? (1 Kings 18:39)
5. What did Elijah tell Ahab to do after the prophets of Baal were killed? (1 Kings 18:41)
6. After Jezebel threatened his life, Elijah ran. How did the Lord care for him? (1 Kings 19:5-8)
7. After hearing his complaint, how did the Lord show himself to Elijah? (1 Kings 19:11, 12)
8. The Lord heard Elijah’s complaint, and then gave him more work. How did the Lord comfort Elijah? (1 Kings 19:18)

Kings and Prophets – What did it mean to them?

When Elijah was mocking the prophets of Baal, his words were more than just insults. He was probably referring to some of the Babylonian myths about their gods. In one myth, the gods were complaining about disrupted sleep. In another, there is a story about Baal going on a journey to different cities. This same story describes the gods cutting themselves to mourn the dead Baal, and this type of cutting was often a part of mourning rituals among Baal followers. Deuteronomy 14:1 specifically forbids this type of cutting.

It may help us to think of the prophets as a whole as a type of clergy. They had regions that they worked in, some were clerks tasked with writing down the words of others, some were given to visions that they spoke to the people as ‘the word of the Lord’. These people could be either men or women. The most common ‘word’ was that God would reward the righteous and punish the wicked, and that the people must be faithful and worship God alone. This mission was one reason that Queen Jezebel had the prophets of YHWH killed—she knew that faithful obedience to the Lord would result in her loss of power, and so she removed the information and teaching of the prophets. Without this guidance, the people of Israel were vulnerable to pressure from the government to worship the ‘right’ way. Jezebel seemed to understand that if you could twist the religion of the people to your side, you could more easily control them.

Kings and Prophets – Application questions

1. Thinking of these stories from the viewpoint of those in exile, the struggle was between holding on to faith in the Lord and switching to the worship of the gods around them. This is a familiar struggle to Christians of all times and places. What are the gods around us which we must resist?
2. When Elijah was preparing the sacrifice before calling on the Lord, he first rebuilt an altar. What steps should we take when we are preparing to do something big in our church?
3. The real sacrifice on the altar was the water! After all, there had been a drought for three years. Ahab was searching for water for his livestock when Elijah reappeared. The water poured over the dead bull and the wood was very precious, and it was all consumed by fire from heaven. What is precious to us today? How do we sacrifice it for the betterment of God's people?

Kings and Prophets – Scripture Questions

1. Why was Ahab told that God would support the army of Israel against Ben-Hadad and the Aramean army? (1 Kings 20:28)
2. What did Ahab want? How did he react to the answer? What did his queen tell him? (1 Kings 20:4, 7)
3. How did Jezebel's plan work out? Was Ahab pleased? (1 Kings 21:15, 16)
- 4a. What did the Lord say would happen to Ahab and his family because of Ahab's evil ways? (1 Kings 21:20, 24)
- 4b. Ahab seemed to repent. How did the Lord respond? (1 Kings 21:29)
5. After the prophet Micaiah was pressed to tell the truth, what was the real prophecy about the upcoming battle against the Arameans? (1 Kings 22:17, 23)
6. As was prophesied, Ahab died at the battle. What happened to his body? (1 Kings 22:37, 38)
7. Jehoshaphat lived rightly in the Lord's eyes, with which exception? What happened there? (1 Kings 22:43)
8. What sort of king was Ahaziah, who succeeded Ahab? (1 Kings 22:53)

Kings and Prophets – What did it mean to them?

It seems important to note that prophetic confrontation wasn't with the pagan followers (even though Elijah had no trouble mocking the pagan priests!), but it was primarily with God's own people. Elijah, Micaiah, and the unnamed prophet spoke to Ahab and the people of Israel, not with Jezebel and the Phoenicians. You will find this throughout the Bible: when you see warnings about worship of other gods, whether in the Old or New Testament, these warnings are given to the people of God. The witness of the people of God is what is needed to make other people come to see God's reality. His saving work doesn't come from confrontation but through God's activity among his people and the way they live. The challenge to the first readers of these histories was the same: in exile they may be, but their calling is the same—to live as God's people.

The idea of property in the Bible is different from our idea. Land was a good that was to be for the benefit of all. Walter Brueggemann talks about it this way:

“The Bible articulates an alternative view which may be designated ‘covenantal/prophetic’. It holds that the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ are bound in community to each other, that viable life depends upon the legitimate respect, care and maintenance of the ‘have-nots’, and of restraints upon the ‘haves’ so that the needs and rights of the disadvantaged take priority over the yearnings of the advantaged. Thus the stress is upon *respect* and *restraint* precisely in those areas of public life where the distribution of power makes respect and restraint unenforceable.

Since the historian was writing to and for a people in exile, who had lost all their land and possessions, this story of Naboth being despoiled—and killed—by a ruler against whom they were helpless would have been especially poignant.

Kings and Prophets – Application questions

1. Ahab has a moment when he seems to genuinely appreciate how much trouble he is in with the Lord, but it apparently doesn't last long. In spite of his failure to change, the Lord gave him grace. Looking at our church and our personal relationships, where do you think the line should be drawn at giving people grace when they seem to repent?
2. The Lord said (through his prophet) that he was the lord of the hills AND the valleys. This may make more sense to us as “the lord of private life AND the lord of public life”. As Disciples, we have a real resistance to being openly, publicly outspoken about our faith. Is this a flaw in our behavior? Should we be more vocal about our beliefs?
3. In order to get what they wanted, Ahab and Jezebel did what the powerful and wealthy have so often done: they perverted justice, using a thin story of lies centered around religion to manipulate the legal system and community. It is very easy to feel helpless in the face of this kind of power. Is there, in fact, anything that we can do? Or should we leave punishment in God's hands?

Kings and Prophets – Scripture Questions – Elijah ascends, Elisha rises

1. When King Ahab's son King Ahaziah was injured, who did he ask about his chances for recovery? Who actually answered his question? (2 Kings 1:2-4)
2. How many times did Ahaziah try to get Elijah to come to him? Did Ahaziah recover? (2 Kings 1:9-17)
3. Three times Elijah gives Elisha a chance to walk away from taking up his work as God's prophet. What did Elijah say? Who witnessed the miraculous crossing of the Jordan? (2 Kings 2:1-8)
4. What did Elisha ask of Elijah? (2 Kings 2:9, 10)
5. How were Elijah and Elisha separated? Who took Elijah up into heaven? (2 Kings 2:11)
6. What was the witness of the prophets who had remained on the other side of the Jordan? (2 Kings 2:15)
7. The people of Jericho recognized Elisha's new status. What did he do for them? (2 Kings 2:19-22)
8. What weird thing happened as Elisha was going past Bethel, a place of worship in Northern Israel? (2 Kings 2:23-25)

Kings and Prophets – What did it mean to them?

The term "Group of Prophets" refers to a collective of individuals in the Old Testament who were called by God to serve as His messengers. These prophets played a crucial role in conveying God's will, guidance, and warnings to the people of Israel. They were often seen as intermediaries between God and His people, delivering messages that called for repentance, obedience, and faithfulness to the covenant.

In 2 Kings 2:3, the "sons of the prophets" are mentioned as a group residing in Bethel, who were aware of Elijah's impending departure. The term "sons of the prophets" suggests a guild or school of prophets who were under the tutelage of a leading prophet, such as Elijah or Elisha. These groups were likely centers for spiritual instruction and communal living, where members were trained in the prophetic ministry. The prophetic groups were characterized by their communal lifestyle and dedication to spiritual disciplines. They engaged in worship, music, and prayer, as indicated by their use of musical instruments in 1 Samuel 10:5. The presence of the Holy Spirit was a defining feature of their ministry, empowering them to speak God's word with authority.

The group of prophets served several functions within Israelite society. They were not only foretellers of future events but also forthtellers, proclaiming God's truth and calling the people to righteousness. Their messages often included calls for social justice, adherence to the Law, and warnings of impending judgment if the people failed to repent. The group of prophets played a pivotal role in maintaining the spiritual health of the nation. Through their ministry, they preserved the knowledge of God and His covenant, ensuring that the people were continually reminded of their identity and responsibilities as God's chosen people. Their presence in the biblical narrative highlights the importance of prophetic witness and the enduring need for God's voice in guiding His people.

These groups were often itinerant, moving from place to place as directed by God. They were known for their distinctive appearance and behavior, which sometimes set them apart from the rest of society. Their commitment to God's calling often led them to confront kings and challenge the status quo, making them both revered and reviled figures in Israel.

Kings and Prophets – Application questions

1. King Ahaziah of Northern Israel was asking for help in the wrong place. When you have questions, where do you get answers?
2. Elijah was obviously a powerful prophet, tasked by God with difficult jobs. He also seems as if he had a temper and a reluctance to do anything unless God told him directly to do it. Elisha seemed to share this personality. What do you think is a good personality for a leader of God's people?
3. There were a LOT of prophets in the area—at least 150! These people (possibly both men and women) were a guild headed by a leader. They were almost certainly married, lived in a community and/or ate together. Worship seemed to be an important part of what they did in their communities. Is there anything like this in modern church settings?

Kings and Prophets – Scripture Questions – Prophet Elisha

1. After Ahaziah, King Ahab's son, died, he was succeeded by another son of Ahab, Jehoram. What sort of king was he? (2 Kings 3:1-3)
2. King Jehoram (Israel) and King Jehoshaphat (Judah) joined forces against Moab. How did the prophet Elisha respond to their request for help obtaining water for their troops and animals? (2 Kings 3:14-16)
3. Elisha's narrative now presents several miracles:
 1. A widow is saved when empty vessels are filled with _____ . (2 Kings 4:6, 7)
 2. A barren Shunamite woman bears a _____ . (2 Kings 4:17)
 3. The Shunamite woman's son is _____ . (2 Kings 4:32-35)
 4. A pot of stew feeding the company of prophets is _____ . (2 Kings 4:40, 41)
 5. A small amount of bread and grain fed _____ . (2 Kings 4:43, 44)
4. When Naaman's servant girl told him that there was a cure for his skin disease, who did he send a request to at first? What was the response to his request? (2 Kings 5:5-7)
5. Who cured Naaman's skin disease? What did Naaman think about the cure? (2 Kings 5:8, 12-14)
6. Gehazi, Elisha's servant, succumbed to greed after Naaman left. What was his punishment? (2 Kings 5:25-27)

Kings and Prophets – What did it mean to them?

When Elisha is consulted by the kings of Israel and Judah before their fight with Moab, he calls for a musician. Music was seen as a conduit to God, and a way to induce prophecy. Almost every religion, ancient or modern, uses music in their worship. There is something about the sounds and the organization that stimulates our minds and hearts. It also bypasses the ‘thinking’ part of our minds and connects directly to the ‘feeling’ part of our being.

The stories of Elisha and widows give us a glimpse into the economic difficulties faced by women, especially those who were married to religious officials. While this widow is unnamed, early traditions identify her as the wife of Obadiah, the pious servant of King Ahab. Whoever she was, after her husband’s death she has become so poor that creditors are coming to take away her two children as slaves. Though this was an accepted way to pay off debt in ancient Israel, it was condemned by the prophets. Elisha’s miracle of the regenerated oil ensures that she and her children are able to support themselves.

In contrast to this poor widow, the woman of Shunem is rich and married, able to provide meals and housing. Elisha does determine that she has no son, which was always considered a lack in women. Elisha prophecies that she will bear a son in a year’s time. This same son was later revived by Elisha.

To the exiles who heard these stories, the narrative would have reassured them that the power of YHWH was with them, even if they were poor and enslaved. YHWH was with them, even if they were in good material surroundings but suffering without a place of worship—an empty place in their hearts, as suggested by the lack of a son. The story of Naaman was not only notable because he was cured, but because the cure was brought about by an enslaved Hebrew. To the exiles, this would have comforted them by showing that even in their exile they were not powerless but supported by YHWH. As far as we know the girl was not freed, just as the exiles were not freed. They were, however, not abandoned by their God.

Kings and Prophets – Application questions

1. The miracles performed by Elisha seem incredible. Would you believe a miracle if you saw one? How would you know it was a miracle?
2. An important part of the story of Naaman's cure is that he heard, and listened to, a Hebrew slave girl. Can you remember a time when an unexpected person helped you?
3. Elisha's servant was unable to stay away from the gifts Naaman freely offered to Elisha. Can you think of things that aren't bad in and of themselves, but are better to stay away from?

Kings and Prophets – Scripture Questions – Prophet Elisha

1. What prophecy was given, and which older prophecy was repeated, to the commander of Israel's army? (2 Kings 9:6-10)
2. After his coup, what did Jehu do to Queen Jezebel? (2 Kings 9:31-37)
3. After Jehu killed all of King Ahab's sons, leaders, friends and advisors, what did he do with the prophets of Baal? (2 Kings 10:23-27)
4. In Judah, Queen Athaliah (sister, or possibly daughter to Ahab of Israel) tries to kill all the royal family. Who is hidden away for protection from her attacks? (2 Kings 11:1-3)
5. The priest Jehoiada protects the boy Jehoash until he can take control of Judah. What actions does the priest take? What sort of king was Jehoash? (2 Kings 11:11-21, 12:1-3)
6. We have one last miracle from Elisha—after his death. What happens? (2 King 13:20, 21)
7. After a (very long) string of kings in Israel who 'did what was evil', what did the King of Assyria do? (2 Kings 15:29)
8. The kings of Israel and Judah were forced by circumstances to give fealty and treasure to King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria. Finally, Israel was destroyed. What was the reason for this, as recounted by the writer of Kings? (2 Kings 17:5-18)

Kings and Prophets – What did it mean to them?

Multiple miracles by Elisha are recounted in the next several chapters, and he is saved from kidnappings and attacks. Even foreign kings recognized his power. The last we see of Elisha is during his final illness when King Joash of Israel comes to see him and weeps over him. It is worth noting that while the kings of Israel recognized Elisha's authority and power, they made very little effort to obey or recognize the God that Elisha served.

There are several instances in these chapters of numbers being used to imply information. First is the death of Ahab's 'seventy' sons. Seventy is a symbolic number that implies totality, or completeness. In this case, it is saying that ALL of Ahab's direct descendants are dead, fulfilling Elijah's prophecy about that family. 'Forty-two' is a number associated with death. Here, the forty-two members of the kin of King Ahaziah of Judah are killed by Jehu during his purge. This kind of numerology, or gematria, was common throughout the ancient world—and there are still people who use it today. It would have been familiar to at least some of the Hebrew people in exile reading these stories.

Both of these narratives (Israel's kings honoring the prophet while ignoring the commands of YHWH, the attempt to use violence and magical thinking to achieve success) were important to the exiles. The stories answered the questions "How did this happen to us?" and "Can we fix the problems with our own power or understanding?" The answers were clear: destruction came because we did not obey YHWH and keep the covenant with him, and we are dependent on the mercy and grace of YHWH for our salvation. As followers of Jesus today, we would do well to keep this in mind as we navigate our world.

Kings and Prophets – Application questions

1. The writer/historian telling the narratives from Kings wanted their hearers to learn important truths. Have you ever heard a story (or perhaps saw a movie) that made a big impact on you? What was the story, and what did you learn?
2. We may find gematria or numerology amusing, but they are just another way that people try to make sense of a world that often seems disordered and confusing. How do you try to organize your world so that it makes sense to you?
3. The religious view of Israel's kings was often very different from the secular or historical view of those same kings. The mental framework we use to 'see' and interpret our world is fundamental to the way we interact with that world. As followers of Christ, how do we reconcile our spiritual framework with the secular world we live in?

Kings and Prophets – Scripture Questions

1. After the writer/historian hammers home the reasons for the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel, who does he say moved into the conquered land? (2 Kings 17:24)
2. Finally, Judah has a good king. What was his name, and what does he do? (2 Kings 18:1-8)
3. Judah has a history of attacks from King Sennacherib of Assyria. In spite of Hezekiah's bribe, Jerusalem itself is under siege. How does Assyria's spokesmen threaten Judah? (2 Kings 18:31-35)
4. When Hezekiah's officials come back to him with Assyria's threat, what does he do, and who does he call on for a word from the Lord? (2 Kings 19:1-7)
5. After Hezekiah's prayer, how does Isaiah answer him? (2 Kings 19:19, 20)
6. What happens to the Assyrian army? (2 Kings 19:35-37)
7. Hezekiah becomes deathly ill. After he begs the Lord to remember his service, what does Isaiah tell him? (2 Kings 20:5, 6)
8. Did Manasseh, Hezekiah's son, do well when he reigned after his father? (2 Kings 21:2-6)
9. How did the Lord respond to Manasseh's reign? (2 Kings 21:10-12)

Kings and Prophets – What did it mean to them?

Remembering that the audience for these histories is the Lord's people in exile, we can see that many of the accounts of kings and prophecies are editorial efforts to explain how the Lord's promises and covenants were broken not by the Lord but by the people who failed to obey his commands. In today's readings we see a contrast between Hezekiah and his son, Manasseh. Hezekiah is shown to be pious, Manasseh is called the worst king of Judah. The people in exile could hear these stories and see that faithfulness could protect a people even in dire circumstances, while disobedience could bring about total spiritual destruction.

In fact, Manasseh breaks almost all the important laws in Deuteronomy. He rebuilds and re-erects the altars for Baal and the sacred poles for Asherah which had been pulled down by Hezekiah. Manasseh worships heavenly hosts, astral bodies, even going to far as to practice child sacrifice. It is possible that this is not only an explanation of how Judah started down the slope toward destruction but a warning to the people in exile to avoid these practices in their exile.

Kings and Prophets – Application questions

1. Stories from history can have a big impact on the way we look at current events. For instance, in our own church history, the revival at Cane Ridge was people from very different religious situations coming together (some speaking in tongues, others strict Bible literalists, still others heavily influenced by the Enlightenment). Because of this background, as Disciples we tend to be very open and welcoming to believers with different ideas. How have you been influenced by past events that shaped your approach to faith?
2. Even though he was a devout follower of the Lord, Hezekiah got very sick and nearly died. His prayer to the Lord evidently persuaded the Lord to let him live. Why do you think that God answers some prayers ‘Yes’ and others ‘No’?
3. Manasseh was a TERRIBLE person...and he reigned 55 years, according to 2 Kings 21. Why do you think that God lets awful people do awful things?

Kings and Prophets – Scripture Questions

1. After Manasseh, his son Amon ruled in Judah as a carbon copy of his father—so much so that he was assassinated. Amon’s supporters installed his son Josiah as king. What kind of king was Josiah? (2 Kings 22:1, 2)
2. During a time when the Temple was being renovated, what did the high priest find? How did King Josiah respond to this discovery? (2 Kings 22:8-12)
3. The prophet Huldah was consulted, and she told of the destruction of Judah—after Josiah’s reign. What public actions did King Josiah take? (2 Kings 23:1-4, 21-25)
4. After Pharaoh Neco of Egypt killed King Josiah at Megiddo, the fall of Judah began in earnest. Which king of Babylon presides over the final destruction? (2 Kings 24:1-4)
5. Who and what did King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon carry away? (2 Kings 24:11-17)
6. King Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, and was punished with siege, famine, the death of his sons, blinding, and exile. What was done to the city of Jerusalem? (2 Kings 25:9-12)
7. Everything of value in the Temple was broken and taken as loot. What happened to the priests, as the last fulfillment of prophecy? (2 Kings 25:18-21)
8. Where did the few remaining people in Jerusalem flee? (2 Kings 25:26)

Kings and Prophets – What did it mean to them?

“Exile runs like a scarlet thread throughout the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, human society begins with the exile of Adam and Eve and is spread through the forced scattering of the people of Babel. Later, the ancestors of Israel also experience exile as God calls on Abram (later Abraham) to emigrate from his homeland. This action is repeated by Jacob, who is Abraham’s grandson, and Jacob’s son Joseph, both of whom are exiled from Canaan. Indeed, Joseph persuades his whole family to move to Egypt from Canaan, an exile that lasts several generations until Moses leads the Israelites back toward the promised land in Exodus.

The cycle of exile and return continues even after the Israelites are settled on the land. The northern kingdom of Israel is exiled and destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. This event leads to the forced migration and resettlement of the northern population to different parts of the Assyrian Empire, resulting in the so-called ten lost tribes of Israel. After the demise of the northern kingdom, the southern kingdom of Judah follows suit at the hands of the Babylonians. Culminating with the destruction of the temple built by Solomon in 586 BCE, portions of Judah’s population are exiled in waves of deportations starting in 597 BCE by the Babylonians. Later, the Persian emperor allows a small group of exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem and build the Second Temple in 538 BCE. This structure is eventually destroyed by another imperial power, Rome, in 70 CE, beginning another exile.

Exiles pockmark the history of Israel, and as such, these events left an indelible mark on the imagination and understanding of the writers and editors of the Hebrew Bible. The text reflects their struggles as it debates the possible causes of exile as well as the reforms and requirements needed to bring it to an end. Indeed, the Hebrew Scriptures—most of which were composed, edited, and collated during the time of exile or shortly thereafter—make up a text of, by, and for exiles. Expressing a gamut of responses about the feelings and struggles of the immigrant experience (cf. Esther, Daniel, and Ezra), the text affirms to those who feel alienated that they too can survive, live, and possibly even thrive in an unknown and challenging context.”

From the Westminster Study Bible, author Song-Mi Suzie Park

Kings and Prophets – Application questions

1. The Hebrew nation, whose history began with an exodus from Egypt, now ends with a reverse exodus as people flee and return to Egypt. Sometimes, the best you can do is start over. Have you ever experienced a time in your life when you had to “start over”? How did you navigate this time?
2. Josiah did his very best to bring the nation back to obedience to Yahweh. In spite of his efforts, the people (as a nation) were conquered and deported. Do you think Josiah failed? Why or why not? How should we think about efforts by our church that seem to fail?
3. God let outside forces bring about the consequences of sin to the nations of Israel and Judah. We have to assume that some of the people killed or taken away were still faithful to God. What do you think this means for us now? Should we be worried about what will happen to us?