

# ***The First Book of the KINGS Commonly Called the Third Book of the Kings***

## **INTRODUCTION**

[Following is the introduction to both 1 Kings and 2 Kings, which are parts of one whole.]

**1. Title.** The present two books of Kings were originally one, known in Hebrew as *Melakim*, “Kings.” In the Hebrew Bible, Kings continued undivided until the time of the printed edition of Daniel Bomberg, 1516–17. The Greek translators of the LXX, who divided the “book of Samuel” into two books, also divided the “book of Kings” into two books, and treated the four as parts 1 to 4 of “Kingdoms.”

The title “Kings” indicates the contents of the books; our present first book of Kings gives the history of the Hebrew monarchs beginning with the death of David and the reign of Solomon and closing with the accession of Jehoram in Judah and Ahaziah in Israel. Second Kings begins with a continuation of the account of Ahaziah’s reign and closes with the end of the kingdom of Judah.

**4. Theme.** Though the books of Kings present the history of the Hebrew rulers from the death of David and the reign of Solomon to the final destruction of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the primary purpose is not to present the facts of history for the sake of history. There is history, but it is presented with a purpose—to show how the experiences of the Hebrews relate to the plans and purposes of God. The object was not so much to write a detailed chronicle of the bald facts of history as to present the lessons of history. The compiler of these books had a deep religious motive and a very practical aim. The children of Israel were the people of God, and it was their task to fulfill the divine purpose and live out on earth the principles of the kingdom of heaven. Righteousness was to be the foundation for national prosperity. Sin could end only in ruin. If true to its divine mission, the nation would grow in strength and greatness. If kings and rulers failed to live up to the divine purpose, Israel as a people would perish. The nation could not exist without righteousness and without God.

The amazing thing is that when the Israelites had failed as a nation and were face with utter and seemingly irretrievable ruin, someone found in the dark history of Israel’s sorrows and defeats something worth recording for generations to come. The lessons of Israel’s failure were to bring light and hope to the world. Upon the ashes of defeat there must yet be reared a new structure of success and victory. Israel might perish, but righteousness must not perish. If the lessons of Israel’s failure were learned, the world would yet find hope in God.

The age when the book of Kings came into being was the age of the prophets. In the pronouncements of this book are to be found the courage and spiritual insight of the prophets, bringing home to the hearts of men lessons from God.

The record of Kings begins with the glorious reign of Solomon, and the building of the Temple, with the nation virile and strong. It ends with the reign of a weak and infamous king, the Temple destroyed, and the land of Judah a desolate ruin. Yet this lesson of ruin was to rouse a new spirit of hope, and to focus attention upon a new and better age to come, with Israel ruled by its eternal King. "Lo, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will bring again the captivity of my people Israel and Judah, saith the Lord: and I will cause them to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall possess it" (Jer. 30:3). "They shall serve the Lord their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up unto them" (v. 9). "Jacob shall return, and shall be in rest, and be quiet, and none shall make him afraid" (v. 10). "I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me for ever, for the good of them, and of their children after them: and I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me. Yea, I will rejoice over them to do them good, and I will plant them in this land" (ch. 32:39–41).

Even though the primary purpose of Kings is not the presentation of history as such, it contains history of great importance and remarkable accuracy. There are items concerning the Hebrew rulers such as are never found in the annals of neighboring states. Secular annals of Israel's neighbors were written to extol the king, to glorify him as builder, hunter, or statesman, to make public his acts of piety in the service of the gods, and to relate his exploits in war. Hebrew records as they have come down to us were to glorify not man but God. So we find in these records of Kings not only the outstanding accomplishments of the Israelite rulers but also their foibles and defeats.

Kings contains items of historical importance not only concerning the kingdoms of Israel and Judah but concerning the nations round about. There are items of interest concerning Tyre and Egypt, ships of Tarshish going to Ophir for gold, Solomon's navy at Ezion-geber on the shores of the Red Sea, the queen of Sheba's coming to Jerusalem with a train of camels carrying spices and gold, Sennacherib's being slain by his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer while worshiping in the house of his god, Syrian fears of Hittite kings, the tribute to Ahab of 100,000 lambs from Mesha, the sheepmaster king of Moab, the sending of the Egyptian forces of Tirhakah to harass the Assyrian hosts besieging Lachish and Libnah, Hiram's importation of almug trees from Ophir to make pillars for the house of the Lord, the offering of the heir apparent as a burnt sacrifice upon a Moabite city wall to purchase the aid of the gods, Assyrian envoys speaking Aramaic and Hebrew in the 8th-7th centuries B.C., Zif and Ethan and Bul as month names in the early history of Canaan—all interesting and vital ingredients of the basic stuff of which history is made.

One of the outstanding features of the books of Kings is their basic chronological framework. Generally speaking, the kings are introduced in the order of their coming to the throne, regardless of whether they ruled in Israel or Judah. Two principal items of chronological information are given for each: (1) a synchronism, dating the beginning of the reign of a king of Judah in a specific year of the contemporary king of Israel, and vice versa, and (2) the length of each reign. Sometimes there are other time statements, such as intervals, regnal dates of events, or synchronisms between certain Hebrew reigns and those of other nations (see pp. 135, 145).

However, there are many difficulties in reconciling the figures given for Israel with those of Judah, and in harmonizing both with non-Biblical chronology. Even in a series of reigns beginning and ending together in Israel and Judah, the totals are not the same. Such difficulties have led some Biblical scholars to conclude that the chronology of the Hebrew kings has become hopelessly confused, through the centuries, because of copyists' errors. The efforts of others to harmonize the data have resulted in numerous theories (though not wide in range), based mostly on varying conjectural revisions of the figures in an effort to reconcile them with non-Biblical chronology (see pp. 140, 143).

Actually, the seeming discrepancies are due largely, if not altogether, to our lack of information as to the various technical methods of reckoning used in Bible times. Our increasing understanding of the basic chronological principles employed by the Hebrew scribes makes possible, through recent studies, the construction of a coherent pattern that aligns the reigns of both Hebrew kingdoms in harmony with practically all of the Biblical data, and with the generally accepted chronology of Assyria and Babylonia (see p. 143).

The dates employed in this commentary for convenient reference (see tabulation on p. 77) are derived from chronological systems of the kings based on thorough studies, and are chosen as showing the greatest degree of harmony among the Biblical data and as coming nearest to a complete solution of the problem. They are presented only as a tentative outline, for it is possible that future discoveries throwing more light on those times may require more or less adjustment of this arrangement as a result of more exact knowledge of the chronology of the period.