

Book of 1 Kings Explained

Title:

First and Second Kings were originally one book, called in the Hebrew text, “Kings,” from the first word (in 1:1).

The Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), divided the book in two and this was followed by the Latin Vulgate version and English translations.

The division was for the convenience of copying this lengthy book on scrolls and codexes and was not based on features of content.

The portrayal of the deeds of Israel’s people, especially its kings, priests and prophets, is colored by the shade of spiritual faithfulness and purity they maintained toward God and His revealed standards.

The selective rehearsal of the people’s repeated spiritual failure, particularly among its leaders, point to Israel’s need of a coming One who, as the heir to David’s throne, would be not only its righteous King but its faithful Prophet and God’s High Priest.

Modern Hebrew Bibles title the books “Kings A” and “Kings B.”

The LXX and Vulgate connected kings with the books of Samuel, so that the titles in the LXX are “The Third and Fourth Books of kingdoms” and in the Vulgate “Third and Fourth Kings.”

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings combined are a chronicle of the entire history of Judah’s and Israel’s kingship from Saul to Zedekiah.

First and Second Chronicles provides only the history of Judah’s monarchy.

Historical Setting:

The two books of Kings recorded the activities of the people of God, moving from the days of Solomon (971-931 B.C.), to the division of the kingdom under Rehoboam.

And then through the history of the twin kingdoms to the occasion of the respective defeats and exiles.

The northern border Kingdom falling (in 722 B.C.), and the southern kingdom (in 586 B.C.).

Israel is seen as the focal point of God’s dealing with the various nations of mankind, especially the Egyptians, Phoenicians, Aramaeans, Assyrians, and Babylonians.

Israel's spiritual disobedience would repeatedly expose them to political threats at the hands of these nations, until the northern kingdom of Israel would fall under the weight of the mighty war machine of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

And the remaining southern kingdom of Judah would come to an end at the hands of the Chaldeans.

The time thus covered, exclusive of the historical appendixes at the end of 2 Kings is about 385 years.

Authorship and Date:

Jewish tradition proposed that Jeremiah wrote Kings, although this is unlikely because the final event recorded in the book (see 2 Kings 25:27-30), occurred in Babylon (in 561 B.C.).

Jeremiah never went to Babylon, but to Egypt (Jer. 43:1-7), and would have been at least 86 years old by 561 B.C.

Actually, the identity of the unnamed author remains unknown.

Since the ministry of prophets is emphasized in Kings, it seems that the author was most likely an unnamed prophet of the LORD who lived in exile with Israel in Babylon.

Liberal scholars have conjectured that First and Second Kings in their present form are the work of a Deuteronomistic School of writers whose basic theological viewpoint is woven into the books from Joshua to Kings and whose literary activity stretched from the eighth century B.C. through the sixth century B.C.

However, no real proof exists of such a group and efforts to suggest the supposed parameters of their writing activities have yielded varying and often conflicting results.

Moreover, the underlying idea that someone associated with the Book of Deuteronomy (also considered to be a late book), was associated with these books is unproven and fails in the growing body of evidence that increasingly shows that Deuteronomy was almost entirely a product of Moses' own writing.

The identity of the author of Kings is unknown, although Jewish tradition holds that its author was Jeremiah.

Although there can be no final certainty in the matter, the fact that Jeremiah was not only a member of a priestly, teaching family, but as God's prophet was an eyewitness and active participant in the events surrounding Judah's demise, argues for such a possibility.

The author of Kings has used many official records and unofficial sources in compiling his history (e.g. 11:41; 14:19, 29, etc.; see the note on 2 Kings 20:20).

Kings was written between 561-538 B.C.

Since the last narrated event (2 Kings 25:27-30), sets the earliest possible date of completion and because there is no record of the end of the Babylonian captivity in Kings.

The release from exile (538 B.C.), identifies the latest possible writing date.

This date is sometimes challenged on the basis of “to this day” statements (in 1 Kings 8:8; 9:13, 20-21; 10:12; 12:19; 2 Kings 2:22; 8:22; 10:27; 14:7; 16:6; 17:23, 34, 41; 21:15).

However, it is best to understand these statements as those of the sources used by the author, rather than statements of the author himself.

It is clear that the author used a variety of sources in compiling this book, including “the book of the acts of Solomon” (1 Kings 11:41), “the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel” (1 Kings 14:19; 15:31; 16:5, 14, 20, 27; 22:39; 2 Kings 1:18; 10:34; 13:8, 12; 14:15, 28; 15:11, 21, 26, 31), and “the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah” (1 Kings 14:29; 15:7, 23; 22:45; 2 Kings 8:23; 12:19; 14:18; 15:6, 36; 16:19; 20:20; 21:17, 25; 23:28; 24:5).

Further (Isaiah 36:1 - 39:8), provided information used (in 2 Kings 18:9 - 20:19 and Jeremiah 52:31-34), seems to be the source for (2 Kings 25:27-29).

This explanation posits a single inspired author, living in Babylon during the Exile, using these pre-Exilic source materials at his disposal.

Although the author has written Kings in a generally historically progressive fashion, he often writes thematically, grouping his facts in a way that is not strictly chronological.

Thus, one must not assume that the details of a given chapter necessarily have happened after those of the preceding chapter (see the note on 2 Kings 20:1).

However, especially in the details relative to the divided kingdom, there is a general historical progression from (1 Kings 12 to the end of 2 Kings; from the mid tenth to the mid-sixth century B.C.).

The dates for the respective kings given here result from a careful evaluation of the various dating methods used in ancient Israel as they are compared with certain established anchor dates in the ancient Near East.

The difficulty of affixing precise dates is hampered by the various ways in which dates were calculated in Israel.

In the northern kingdom, dating was reached by a non-accession system (by which the year that a man became king was listed as both his first year and the last year of his predecessor).

In Judah, an accession year system was used, whereby a new king's first year was calculated from the beginning of the new year in the fall after his enthronement, until about 841 B.C., after which a change was made to the non-accession system.

However, both kingdoms switched to the accession year system in the early eighth century B.C., possibly under the influence of Assyria.

Adding to the difficulty is the fact that the length of the reign of some kings included a period of serving as co-regent with their fathers.

Despite the complexity of the problem, a relatively accurate system of dating has been established.

Setting and Background:

A distinction must be made between the setting for the books' sources and that of the books' author.

The source material was written by participants in and eyewitnesses of the events.

It was reliable information, which was historically accurate concerning the sons of Israel, from the death of David and the accession of Solomon (971 B.C.), to the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem by the Babylonians (586 B.C.).

Thus, Kings traces the histories of two sets of kings and two nations of disobedient people, Israel and Judah, both of whom were growing indifferent to God's law and His prophets and were headed for captivity.

The book of Kings is not only accurate history, but interpreted history.

The author, an exile in Babylon, wished to communicate the lessons of Israel's history to the exiles.

Specifically, he taught the exilic community why the LORD's judgment of exile had come.

The writer established early in his narrative that the LORD required obedience by the kings to the Mosaic law, if their kingdom was to receive His blessing; disobedience would bring exile (1 Kings 9:3-9).

The sad reality that history revealed was that all the kings of Israel and the majority of the kings of Judah "did evil in the sight of the LORD."

These evil kings were apostates, who led their people to sin by not confronting idolatry, but sanctioning it.

Because of the kings' failure, the LORD sent His prophets to confront both the monarchs and the people with their sin and their need to return to Him.

Because the message of the prophets was rejected, the prophets foretold that the nation(s) would be carried into exile (2 Kings 17:13-23; 21:10-15).

Like every prophecy uttered by the prophets in Kings, this word from the LORD came to pass (2 Kings 17:5-6; 25:1-11).

Therefore, Kings interpreted the people's experience of exile and helped them to see why they had suffered God's punishment for idolatry.

It also explained that just as God had shown mercy to Ahab (1 Kings 22:27-29), and Jehoiachin (2 Kings 25:27-30), so He was willing to show them mercy.

The predominant geographical setting of Kings is the whole Land of Israel, stretching from Dan to Beer-sheba (1 Kings 4:25), including Transjordan.

Four invading nations played a dominant role in the affairs of Israel and Judah from 971 to 561 B.C.

In the tenth century B.C., Egypt impacted Israel's history during the reigns of Solomon and Rehoboam (1 Kings 3:1; 11:14-22, 40; 12:2; 14:25-27).

Syria (Aram), posed a great threat to Israel's security during the ninth century B.C., ca. 890 – 800 B.C. (1 Kings 15:9-22; 20:1-34; 22:1-4, 29-40; 2 Kings 6:8 – 7:20; 8:7-15; 10:32-33; 12:17-18; 13:22-25).

The years from ca. 800 to 750 B.C., were a half-century of peace and prosperity for Israel and Judah, because Assyria neutralized Syria and did not threaten to the south.

This changed during the kingship of Tiglath-Pileser III (2 Kings 15:19-20, 29).

From the mid-eighth century to the late seventh century B.C., Assyria terrorized Palestine, finally conquering and destroying Israel (the northern kingdom in 722 B.C.; 2 Kings 17:4-6).

And besieging Jerusalem (in 701 B.C.; 2 Kings 18:17 – 19:37).

From (612 to 539 B.C.), Babylon was the dominant power in the ancient world.

Babylon invaded Judah (the southern kingdom), 3 times (605, 597 and 586 B.C.), with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple occurring (in 586 B.C.), during that third assault (2 Kings 24:1 – 25:21).

Although the historical trustworthiness of Kings has been demonstrated repeatedly, one must not read these two books simply as history.

The two books are, above all, a telling of God's spiritual dealings with His vacillating people.

It narrates how the people of God managed their God-given responsibilities before a sovereign and gracious God.

It stands as a record of God's reward for obedience and faithfulness, and for His judgment of disobedience.

Before Israel entered the Promised Land, Moses had sternly cautioned the people about falling prey to pride and arrogance.

Once they entered Canaan and became established in God's blessings, they would be tempted to say as a people, "My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth."

But Moses exhorted them: "You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers ... then it shall be, if you by any means forget the LORD our God, and follow other gods ... I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish" (Deut. 8:17-19).

Those verses summarize First and Second Kings (one long book in the original Hebrew Bible).

It is the story of how God blessed Israel and elevated her above all nations under the rule of Solomon.

But it is also a story of decline and destruction and warnings unheeded.

The Nations divided into two.

10 tribes in the north with their capital of Samaria and two tribes in the south centered around Jerusalem.

Two lines of kings, two capitals, two agendas and political divisions that symbolized the spiritual division in its heart.

The people grew double- minded, living luxuriously in their wealth and following after idols instead of acknowledging the God who gave them everything.

By the end of 2 Kings, both Israel and Judah had been taken into captivity into other lands.