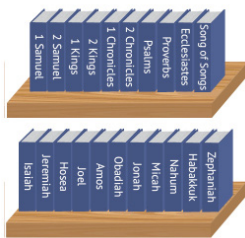


Old Testament: Kings Through Exile

Our Daily Bread Christian University
This course was developed by
Christian University &
Our Daily Bread Ministries



Kings (1050–586 BC)



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At the end of the previous section, we saw that Israel was at a spiritual low, in a state of anarchy, and in a weak military condition. The Philistines had risen in power and were threatening to swallow up the Jews, one city at a time. A clamor went up for a king to unite Israel and organize it for battle. So the prophet-judge Samuel anointed Saul as Israel's first king.

Saul's 40-year rule was turbulent and generally ineffective. He commanded people's respect because of his size, but he was hardly qualified to rule a nation. He had in his kingdom, however, a young man of tremendous abilities named David. Even before David ascended the throne, he captured the hearts of the people by killing the Philistine giant Goliath and by brilliant military and personal exploits. Gradually Saul lost his grip on himself and his kingdom, and when he died in battle David became king.

David quickly subdued the Philistines and began to annex surrounding nations. Israel grew in wealth, military power, and influence. David succeeded in uniting the north and south, captured Jerusalem and made it his capital, and encouraged the worship of God throughout the land. He was Israel's greatest king.

One privilege was denied him, though. God did not allow him to build the temple. That was accomplished by Solomon, his son and heir to the throne. Israel reached its zenith at the dedication of the magnificent temple he had built. Through Solomon, however, the nation began to deteriorate. He brought in wives and concubines from many lands, and they carried their false religions with them. He lived luxuriously, wasting the nation's wealth. He did not prepare for the future. So when he died,

the north seceded under his servant Jeroboam and formed an independent nation. When Solomon died, the people came to Rehoboam, the crown prince, with the plea:

“Your father made our yoke heavy; now therefore, lighten the burdensome service of your father, and his heavy yoke which he put on us, and we will serve you” (1 Kings 12:4).

But Rehoboam refused, and the nation divided. The Northern Kingdom, whose first king was Jeroboam, went its own way. Its rulers and many of its people served the pagan gods of the land. There were some good kings in Judah, the Southern Kingdom. Interestingly, the two nations later formed a political alliance to combat Syria and later Assyria. There was royal intermarriage, and wicked people ruled both lands: in Israel, the house of Omri; in Judah, the wicked Athaliah. The time of the kings was also the time of the prophets. These men fulfilled a twofold purpose:

- *Forthtelling*—They pointed out the sin in the land and called for repentance.
- *Foretelling*—They looked beyond the days of Israel’s failure to the coming of her Messiah and the establishment of His kingdom.

In the days that followed, God raised up a number of prophets to proclaim His truths and to call the nation to return to Him. Some of these men spoke to Israel, some spoke to Judah, and others spoke to foreign powers.

The day of God’s judgment finally came. The two nations decayed from within, and each was defeated by a powerful outside force. The Northern Kingdom fell to the cruel Assyrians in 722 BC. Its people were forced to intermarry with other captives, and it soon lost its ethnic, political, and religious identity.

The Southern Kingdom lasted another 150 years, with flashes of glory such as during the reign of Azariah and Josiah. It finally fell to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, in 586 BC.

Seeing God. As we look at the period of Israel’s kings, we see God at work in ways that help us know Him better. An example is the anointing of David as king and his activities before he ascended the throne (1 Samuel 16-31). We learn that:

Elijah	Isaiah	Ezekiel
Elisha	Nahum	Daniel
Jonah	Zephaniah	Haggai
Amos	Jeremiah	Zechariah
Hosea	Habakkuk	Joel
Micah	Obadiah	Malachi

- God sometimes uses intermediaries to call people to special places of service (16:1-13).
- God's choices are not always based on appearances (16:7).
- God is able to make the last become first (16:11).
- God uses His anointed to topple those who are mighty in man's eyes (ch. 17).
- God values life over ritual (ch. 21).
- God gives us the grace to be merciful to our enemies (chs. 24, 26).
- God sometimes uses the bad to accomplish His purposes (ch. 31).

Seeing Ourselves. The times of Israel's kings also show us ourselves. Observe how these incidents echo God's work in our own times.

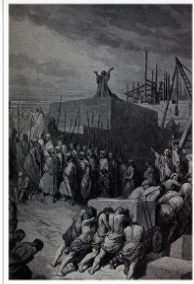
- In Saul's jealous anger, we see our own envy of those who replace us (1 Samuel 18–19).
- In Hannah's earnest prayer for a son, we see our own desire for God's blessing (1 Samuel 1–2).
- In the words of Psalm 1, we see our own path to blessing.
- In Psalm 32, we hear our own cry for forgiveness.
- In Psalm 100, we find words for our own feelings of praise to the Lord.
- In Ecclesiastes, we find expression for our own struggle with a sense of futility (1:2).
- In Elijah's flight from Jezebel, we see our own faltering faith before a powerful foe (1 Kings 19).
- In the healing of Hezekiah, we see our own need for the healing that God alone can give (2 Kings 20).
- In Zedekiah's disregard of the prophets, we see our own refusal to heed God's Word (2 Chronicles 36:11-14).

Exile (586–400 BC)



Exile (586-400 BC)

Happily, the story of the Old Testament does not end with Jerusalem in ruins and her people exiled in Babylon. Rather, it concludes with the return of the Jews to Jerusalem, the rebuilding of the walls, and the restoration of the temple. It also



tells of the spiritual rebirth of the people and their willingness to trust in the leading of God.

The period of the Exile actually covers two subjects: (1) the exile in Babylon, and (2) the return to Jerusalem. Two different nations ruled Judah in exile. Babylonia was crumbling and in 536 BC (50 years after the Jews were deported) the kingdom of Medo-Persia succeeded in conquering her. The new ruler, Cyrus, allowed the Hebrews to return to their land. Under Zerubbabel, 42,360 Jews made the long journey back to Jerusalem and immediately began work on the temple.

Opposed in their project by the Samaritans, the people became discouraged. Work on the temple ceased for about 10 years, and the people slid back into spiritual complacency. But the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah, as well as the spiritual leadership of Ezra, caused them to take up the work again. They completed the temple in 515 BC.

About 50 years later, Nehemiah, still in Babylon, felt a great concern for the Jews of Jerusalem. As one of King Artaxerxes' important servants, he was able to approach the monarch for permission to lead a procession back to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls of the city. Permission was granted and funding supplied. In record time the walls were rebuilt.



After 12 years, Nehemiah returned to the court of Babylon. In his absence, the people and priests took up their evil ways once again. The prophet Malachi was raised up to point out their sins and warn them about the judgment of God.

Seeing God. As we read about the decree of Cyrus in Ezra 1, we observe the following truths about God:

- In Babylon's practice of letting a nation maintain its ethnic and religious identity, we see God at work protecting His people.
- In the captivity, we see God's ability to move a whole nation to accomplish His purposes.
- In the decree of Cyrus, we see His power to direct the thinking of a powerful ruler.
- In the provision of material to build, we see His power to supply.

- In the return of the Jews, we see God's commitment to His covenants and prophecies.
- In the return of Israel, we see His exaltation among the nations.

Seeing Ourselves. We can see ourselves in the era of exile and return in the following representative ways:

- In Israel's exile, we see our own sense of estrangement from God because of sin.
- In the Jews' return to faith, we see our own flight to God in times of chastisement.
- In the decrees of Cyrus and Darius, we recognize the hand of God directing our affairs.
- In Esther's courage, we see our own potential for stalwart deeds of faith
- (Esther 8).
- In the returned exiles' fear of opposition, we see our own trembling before God's foes (Ezra 4).
- In their stopping the building of the temple, we see our own lack of determination (Ezra 4).
- In Daniel's courage, we see our own potential to stand up for our convictions (Daniel 1, 6).
- In Israel's hope of the Messiah, we see our own expectation of His return.