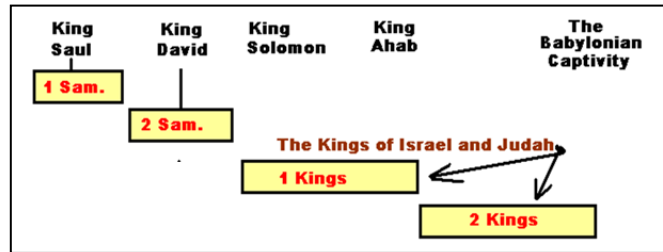


THE BOOKS OF KINGS

The two Books of Kings are regarded by many as the last part of a work commonly known as the Deuteronomistic History. The latter tells the story of Israel from its settlement in the land (Joshua and Judges) through the transition from judgeship to monarchy under Samuel, Saul, and David (1 and 2 Samuel) to the reign of Solomon, the disintegration of the united kingdom into the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and the eventual downfall of both kingdoms (1 and 2 Kings). The Deuteronomistic History along with the Pentateuch forms a single historical narrative stretching from creation to exile.



The Books of Kings can be approached in several ways. They contain history and are an important source of information about the Israelite kingdoms. They are also narrative that calls for careful reading; historical accuracy is sometimes sacrificed to the demands of compelling characterization and dramatic tension. Most importantly, both historical presentation and narrative creativity are shaped by a particular religious worldview.

The multifaceted character of the work means that it has a variety of focal points. The historical events themselves, of course, are important, but the patterns according to which the author organizes those events give a unity to the author's historical reconstruction. The northern kings are condemned without exception, and the royal line degenerates from the divine election of Jeroboam I through a succession of short-lived dynasties to the bloodbath of Jehu's coup d'état, and finally dies out in a series of assassinations. (It must be admitted that the author at times skews the story to preserve the pattern: the relatively prosperous forty-one-year reign of Jeroboam II is dismissed in seven verses!) Judah's kings, on the other hand, follow a cyclic pattern of infidelity followed by reform, with each reformer king (Asa, Joash, Hezekiah, Josiah) greater than the last. Unfortunately the apostate kings also progress in wickedness, until the evil of Manasseh is so great that even Josiah's fidelity cannot turn away the Lord's wrath ([2 Kgs 23:26](#)).

As a literary work, the Books of Kings are admirable. Some of the brilliance is accessible only in Hebrew: wordplays, the sounds and rhythms of poetic passages, verbal allusions to other passages of the Hebrew Bible. Scenes are drawn with a vibrancy and immediacy that English cannot reproduce without sounding overdone. But other literary techniques survive translation: symmetrical structures for narrative units (and the disruptions of symmetry at significant points), rich ambiguities (see [1 Kgs 3:26](#)), foreshadowings (such as the way the prophet of Bethel and the man of God of Judah in [1 Kgs 13](#) portend the



destinies of their respective kingdoms). Characterization is rich and complex (Solomon, Jeroboam, Elijah, Ahab, Elisha, Jehu, etc.), revealing deep insight into human nature.

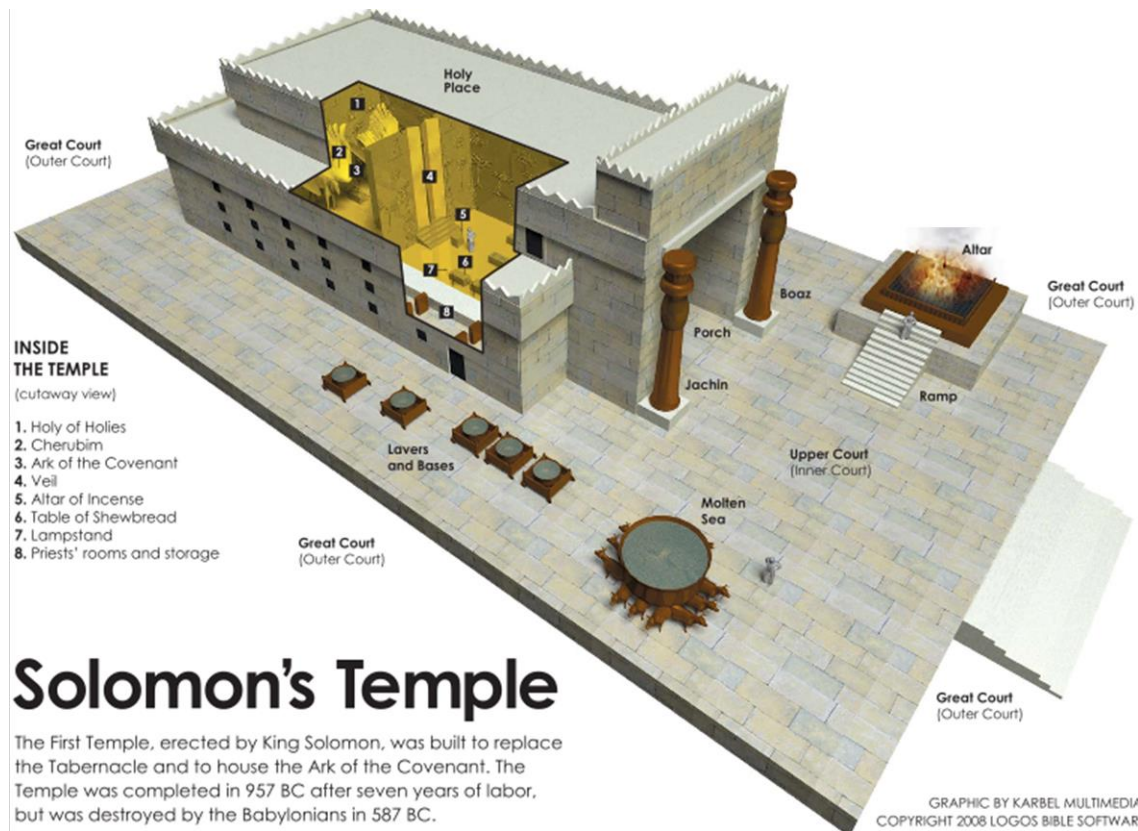


In offering a theological interpretation of history, 1–2 Kings upholds a double principle: the justification of the political disintegration of the Davidic empire, and the necessity of the religious unity of the Lord’s people. This double principle is, practically speaking, unrealistic; see Jeroboam I’s reasonable assessment in [1 Kgs 12:26–27](#). But for the Deuteronomistic historian, that is irrelevant. Just as the separation of the kingdoms is the Lord’s will ([1 Kgs 12:22–24](#)), so too is the centralization of worship at the Temple in Jerusalem ([1 Kgs 9:3](#); see [Dt 12](#)). 1–2 Kings reflects that double principle in its organization. The story of each king is told integrally, whether the king is of Israel or Judah: both lines of kings are legitimate. But the stories of the two lines are recounted in the order in which each king came to the throne, irrespective of which kingdom he ruled: there is only one people of God, though they are under two different royal jurisdictions. Moreover, each king is evaluated on theological grounds, with no allowance made for political or economic successes or failures. All Israelite kings are condemned because they did not reverse Jeroboam I’s sin of setting up sanctuaries outside Jerusalem. Judahite kings are condemned for apostasy or praised for reform, as the case may be; but a continuing source of irritation to the Deuteronomistic historian is the failure of even the praiseworthy kings to do anything about local shrines outside Jerusalem (the “high places”).

Into the stories of the kings, almost as a counterpoint, are woven numerous stories of prophets, named and great (Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah), and less known or anonymous ([1 Kgs 13](#); [22](#)). Many of the stories are anecdotal, reflecting the everyday life of prophets and prophetic guilds ([1 Kgs 17](#); [2 Kgs 4](#)). But the volatile dynamics of prophetic involvement in the political realm are prominent: prophets in opposition to kings ([1 Kgs 14](#); [21](#); [2 Kgs 9](#)), prophets in support of kings ([1 Kgs 20:1–34](#); [2 Kgs 19–20](#); [22:14–20](#)). This too is part of the theological worldview of the Deuteronomistic historian. The destiny of Israel is in God’s hand. Through prophets, the divine will is made known on earth to kings and people and the future consequences of their response to God’s will are spelled out. It is perhaps indicative of the importance prophets have in 1 and 2 Kings that the structural center of the two books is the story of Elisha’s succession to Elijah’s prophetic ministry ([2 Kgs 2](#)), and that this is one of the few passages in Kings that occurs outside the account of any king’s reign. Behind the temporal realm of kings and reigns lies the continuing realm of the divine word and its servants, the prophets.



1–2 Kings draws on older sources (perhaps on archival records, certainly on works called “The Book of the Chronicles of the Kings”; see, for example, [1 Kgs 14:19, 29](#)), which it uses for its own theological purpose. The so-called Deuteronomistic History itself underwent a complex process of editorial revision whose stages are disputed by scholars. There may have been an edition sometime late in the reign of Josiah (640–609 B.C.), but in the form we have it the work comes from the time of the exile (see [2 Kgs 25:27–30](#)). In its turn the Deuteronomistic History was one of the sources used by the Chronicler in postexilic times to compile the history presented in 1 and 2 Chronicles. Though Chronicles has little interest in the Northern Kingdom, much of the material in Kings about the kingdom of Judah reappears, sometimes in altered form, in Chronicles.



The Books of Kings may be divided as follows:	
I. The Reign of Solomon (1 Kgs 1:1–11:43)	VI. Elisha Succeeds Elijah (2 Kgs 2:1–25)
II. The Reign of Jeroboam (1 Kgs 12:1–14:20)	VII. Stories of Elisha and Joram (2 Kgs 3:1–9:13)
III. Kings of Judah and Israel (1 Kgs 14:21–16:34)	VIII. The End of the Omrid Dynasty (2 Kgs 9:14–11:20)
IV. The Story of Elijah (1 Kgs 17:1–19:21)	IX. Kings of Judah and Israel (2 Kgs 12:1–17:5)
V. The Story of Ahab (1 Kgs 20:1–2 Kgs 1:18)	X. The End of Israel (2 Kgs 17:6–41)
	XI. The End of Judah (2 Kgs 18:1–25:30)

Source for text: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) website