

**Ezra:**

Kings and Prophets. Sounds dramatic enough. Prophets, especially. Mysterious, to say the least. Everyone loves a good mystery no matter what time period you live in, I suppose. But a lot of Christians hardly bother to crack those prophetic books.

**Paul:**

Reading about the kings and prophets of the Old Testament is a daunting task for modern people. It is very difficult for you to keep names and countries straight. It is difficult for you to deal with prophecies and figurative language.

**Ezra:**

To understand the subject of the kings and prophets, you must go back to an ancient agreement. The entire history of the Jewish people hinges on the agreement they made with God at Mount Sinai during the Exodus. An agreement they made with God.

I am one of the most renowned scholars of Scripture. In my time, the Scriptures meant solely the books of *Genesis* through *Deuteronomy*. Most of the other books of the Old Testament were written, but they had not yet attained the status of Scripture.

One reason many people of your time don't understand the Old Testament is much of it is not presented in chronological order. When the Old Testament was written, we were quite familiar with the chronology but were most interested in its message. On its most basic level, the Old Testament is the history of the ancient Jewish people and the revealing of God through them.

The history of the Jewish people in the Old Testament can be separated into three phases: from the creation of mankind to the Jews' exile in Egypt; leaving Egypt through conquering the land of Canaan; and the era of the kings and prophets.

The books of *Ruth* to *Malachi* primarily tell of the last era - that of the kings and prophets. They tell about the establishment and existence of the kingdom of Israel; the exile of the Jews in Babylon; and the return of the Jews to Israel.

On mount Sinai the Jewish people agreed to be God's people and obey him completely, while God agreed to protect and defend them.<sup>1</sup> The rest of the Old Testament is about the Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 19:5-8

people keeping or not keeping their side of the agreement, and God keeping his side, based upon the actions of the Jewish people and his innate nature of love and justice.

Much of the history of the ancient Jewish people can be explained by knowing the first of the Ten Commandments. "You shall have no other gods before me."<sup>2</sup> It is this one commandment that continually trips them up.

In this era, the Jewish people choose to follow kings instead of God. The kings lead the people to worship other gods despite the warnings of the prophets. God lets the enemies of the Jews defeat them and take the survivors into exile for seventy years. This ends the era of the kings. Over the time period of a century, the Jews return to Israel in three waves. God is in control all the time.

The prophets were often uncomfortable with the idea that God used their enemies to discipline them. That idea may be uncomfortable for you, too, but it is a fact that God states over and over through his prophets. So, it is impossible to understand the stories of the kings and prophets without knowing the enemies that the nation of Israel faced at a particular point of time.

The initial enemies of Israel were the indigenous people of the land of Canaan, the Canaanites. The Israelites did not eradicate them, so the Canaanites plagued them for centuries, introducing them to false gods.

The peripheral enemies of the Israelites were the peoples of the nations surrounding Israel. They first encountered these peoples while on the exodus from Egypt. Going counterclockwise on the map from the west, these were the Philistines, Amalekites, Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, and Arameans. Although these enemies also worshiped false gods, their physical proximity and warlike natures were their major threats through the centuries.

From time to time, giant empires arose that threatened to overwhelm the Israelites, and did overwhelm them when God allowed it. The empires that mattered during the times of the kings and prophets were Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia.

Why did a tiny country like Israel have so many enemies? It did not have a lot of natural resources or farming land that other countries coveted. They did not have strategic ports or big cities. One reason they had so many enemies is simply because it is in the nature of countries to want to expand to surrounding areas to have more farm land to grow food for expanding populations.

Located between empires, it was a natural target from all directions. More importantly, in the era of kings and prophets, the ships were tiny and unreliable, so most trade was done over land.

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 20:3

Israel's location caused a very important trade route to cut across it. This trade route would become known as the Via Maris connecting Egypt and Damascus. That may not sound like much to you, but it connected world trade from Asia to Africa to Europe.

Another important trade route in the area stretched from the Red Sea to Damascus, the King's Highway. It connected Asia to Europe and Africa. Anyone controlling both the King's Highway and the Via Maris at the same time would have been powerful indeed. King David and King Solomon controlled both of those trade routes and became fabulously wealthy.

Joshua and the twelve tribes of Jews never completely conquered the land of Canaan as God instructed them to do. Thus opening a door to a people known as the Philistines to settle on the Mediterranean Coast and the western side of Israel. They became bitter enemies.

Eventually the Philistines were so troublesome that the Jews demanded God give them a physical king to lead them in battle. This was a direct rejection of God's leadership. The result of their demand was that Saul was chosen as the first king. He began uniting the twelve tribes into the nation of Israel and fought the Philistines for forty years.

His successor, David, further united the tribes into one nation and conquered all the surrounding countries. This was the height of Israel's glory. David turned that vast kingdom over to Solomon. The nation was rich, and was united in worshiping God. Regaining this Davidic kingdom became forevermore the dream of the Jews. It was a short-lived time period of time, far less than a century.

Under Solomon's son, the kingdom split into the Northern Kingdom, also known as Israel or Samaria; and the Southern Kingdom, also known as Judah. The worship of false gods proliferated, and both kingdoms degenerated into petty, tiny countries. This period is very confusing to read about in the Bible because its narrative often alternates between the two kingdoms.

Eventually, the Northern Kingdom degenerated so badly that God let it be destroyed completely. The Southern Kingdom was eventually defeated by Babylon. Babylon deported the Jews to Babylon for about seventy years, and then allowed them to return to their devastated country.

Sporadically, God sent prophets who tried to give messages from God to the people about reforming their ways. One theme running throughout the stories of the kings and prophets is that the Israelites wanted to follow false gods, and God wanted them to follow him as they had promised to do. Doesn't sound too mysterious when you put it that way, does it?

**Paul:**

As a young man, I could have told you everything the Jews knew about the Old Testament. There were centuries of intense study handed down from scholar to scholar. We knew everything about everything as far as God and his laws were concerned. The best Jewish scholars of my time were able to clearly define the laws of God and how they should be followed. If it could be figured out, we had figured it out. That was the problem. We thought we understood the Old Testament and all of its possible meanings. To us, there was no mystery involved.

What we could not know was this – we were involved in the world’s greatest mystery and we only had a few clues. This wasn’t because we were uneducated. It wasn’t because we didn’t try hard enough. It was an unfathomable mystery because God made it one. How were we to overcome God’s intention?

I talk about this in several of the letters I wrote that are included in your New Testament.<sup>3</sup> The only way my contemporaries found out about the mystery was because God revealed it to us in the person of Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

One part of the mystery? The Old Testament scriptures point to Jesus. You cannot really understand the Old Testament, from a Christian point of view, without having the New Testament. It is only through the words and life of Jesus, through the leading of the Holy Spirit, through the writings of the New Testament that you can understand many Old Testament passages.

Jesus tried to explain that several times during his life, but it wasn’t until his resurrection that his explanations started to make sense. Only a few hours after his resurrection, Jesus was somewhat disguised when he met two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. After listening to them for a while, this is what happened: beginning with Moses and all of the Prophets, Jesus explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning him.<sup>5</sup>

A few hours later, Jesus met with his apostles. He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures!<sup>6</sup> He said that everything must be fulfilled that is written about him in the Old Testament.<sup>7</sup> The apostles had lived with Jesus for three years, but he had to open their minds so they could finally see this mystery.

Why am I telling you all of this?

Simply understanding the prophets and kings at an historical level is a tremendous task. But as you do that, you will start seeing Jesus in many passages of the Old Testament. It should be

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 11:25, Romans 16:25, 1 Corinthians 2:7, Ephesians 1:9, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 1:9, 3:3

<sup>5</sup> Luke 24:27

<sup>6</sup> Luke 24:44-45

<sup>7</sup> Luke 24:44 The Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms are essentially the Old Testament

reassuring to you, as it was to the early Christians, that God's mysterious plans were being fulfilled throughout history.

Permit me to tell you three reasons why the stories of the kings and prophets are relevant to your life. First, knowing about the kings and prophets helps you understand the New Testament. Jesus and the writers of the New Testament believed in the prophets and often quoted them. Many of the Old Testament prophecies are critical to understanding the authority and nature of Jesus. Even though Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets, they are still relevant to understanding the New Testament.

Second, the situations portrayed in the kings and prophets often reflect your society, your family, and your life. The problems are clearly described and God's solutions are given to benefit you. You also get to see the difference in following God's solutions and other solutions that might occur to you.

The third, and my most favorite, reason the kings and prophets are important to you is that God reveals many of his characteristics there. You find that God desperately wants to have a deep, loving relationship with you. You learn that you are blessed by being obedient to God. You are awestruck by the fact that the God of the Universe wants the best for you. He does not want to punish you unless it is for your own benefit. You learn that the purpose of your life is to glorify God by loving him and all people. You learn that God is in control.

With all those things being true, as you start to read about the kings and prophets, I hope you will say with me, "Lord, open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Psalms 119:18