

Few Christians have a deep understanding of the Old Testament kings of Israel, or the prophets and their messages. The purpose of this series is to allow anybody to quickly gain a better understanding of those things, as well as an appreciation of how that information is relevant today. The Old Testament prophets were real people who proclaimed important messages from God that have stayed true for thousands of years. Jesus and the apostles thought the kings and prophets were important, so we should, too.

It is no wonder that few Christians have deep familiarity of the kings and prophets. Christians tend to read the New Testament, while the kings and prophets are in the Old Testament. The books of the kings and prophets are not arranged in chronological order, the history of ancient Israel and its neighbors is complex, and the geography of the region is an ever-shifting jigsaw puzzle. The language of the prophets is often symbolic or metaphorical, and the intended messages seem to be shrouded in mystery. Lastly, many people assume that Old Testament prophecies have mostly been fulfilled, so they must not still be very important.

Perhaps our attitudes would change if we thought of prophets as truth tellers, not fortune tellers. Their truths stand important today. Besides, it may be that a number of their prophecies of the future have not yet been fulfilled.

Chronology of the Kings and Prophets

Part of our challenge in understanding is that the Bible seldom fixes dates to the events or stories. The dates used in this series are often derived from the *Archaeological Study Bible* published in 2005. In many cases, the dates used in this series are very approximate.

At www.eyewitnessbible.org, Reference 7, there is an invaluable timeline that is very helpful in quickly seeing the chronology and relationships of the events and people in this series. It may take a moment to understand it, but it is a handy guide to print out and keep at hand whenever you are studying the kings and prophets of Israel.

An understanding of the kings and prophets requires a basic background in the evolving political structure of the land of Israel. Here is a simple seven-step structure of a one thousand-year time period in history of the nation of Israel.

- 1406 BC: The Israelites enter the land of Canaan. Under the leadership of Joshua, the land is divided among the twelve tribes. Each tribe rules its land under its tribal elders. From time to time, God raises up Judges.

- 1050 BC: Saul is named king. He unites the twelve tribes into one kingdom. Beginning with Samuel, God raises up prophets from time to time.
- 1010 BC: A two-year civil war begins between Saul's son, Ish-Bosheth, and David. David prevails and keeps the kingdom united.
- 930 BC: The united kingdom is split into the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. Each kingdom has its own kings, and God sends prophets to deal with each kingdom.
- 722 BC: The Northern Kingdom is defeated by Assyria, goes into permanent exile, and is scattered so well that it is "lost."
- 586 BC: The Southern Kingdom is defeated by Babylon, and goes into exile there.
- 538 BC: The first exiles of the Southern Kingdom return to Jerusalem. Other exiles return over the next one hundred years. Malachi is the last prophet in about 440-430 BC.

The period of the prophets in this series extends from Samuel in about 1100 BC to Malachi in 430 BC. In these nearly seven centuries, there were drastic changes in governments and country borders.

Our interest centers on the country of Israel as it existed at the time of King Saul's inauguration in 1050 BC after he had united the twelve tribes of Israel. One hundred and twenty years later, the kingdom was split into two entities. The Northern Kingdom, also confusingly known as Israel or Samaria, consisted of all of Saul's kingdom except the original area of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Simeon. The area of those three tribes was known as the Southern Kingdom, also confusingly known as Judah. Each of the kingdoms had a series of kings as described in 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. (www.eyewitnessbible.org, Reference 1, Maps 4-8)

The Northern Kingdom existed until 722 BC when it was destroyed by the Assyrians and all of the people were killed or dispersed. This is sometimes known as the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel. The prophets that concentrated their efforts on the Northern Kingdom were Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, Amos, and Hosea.

The Southern Kingdom existed until 586 BC, when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, and the people were taken into exile. Although many people came back from exile many decades later, the Southern Kingdom never came back to power. The line of David existed through the Southern Kingdom, not the Northern Kingdom. Also, the city of Jerusalem with its Temple existed in the Southern Kingdom, so the people of the Northern Kingdom were cut off from their center of worship.

The purpose of the prophets was to guide the kings and the Jewish people to live in accordance with God's Word. To say that the prophets failed abysmally would be an understatement. That was not due to the prophets' lack of effort, but to the hard hearts of the people.

Empires

During its entire existence, the country of ancient Israel was continually in danger from its enemies. In general, during the times of the prophets, there were three empires that influenced Israel. The Assyrian Empire was influential until about 620 BC, when the Babylonians (also known as the Chaldeans) took over. They were influential until about 539 BC when the Persians defeated the Babylonians.

In addition to these three Empires, smaller city-states and countries often plagued the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. These included: Philistia, Moab, Damascus, Egypt, Edom, Tyre, Ammon and Ninevah. The prophets often prophesied against all of the empires and countries, but they showed that God sometimes used Israel's enemies to punish or encourage Israel.

Storyline of the Kings and Prophets

Perhaps the most concise way to describe the storyline of the prophets and kings is to look at three passages of Scripture.

The first covenant with God and the Jewish nation is found in Exodus 19:5-8, with God saying to the Israelites through Moses:

“Now if you will fully obey my voice, and keep my covenant, then you will be a special treasure to me above all peoples: for all the earth is mine. And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to say to the Israelites.” And, Moses went back and called for the elders of the people, and put before them all these words the Lord had commanded him to say. The people all answered together, “We will do all the Lord has said.”

From that point on, the Israelites chose not to obey God fully, per the terms of the covenant; and, God reacted to their disobedience as he deemed best. That ongoing disobedience was described by God many centuries later when he responded to Samuel in 1 Samuel 8:7-9, after the people had asked Samuel to appoint for them a king:

“Pay attention to the voice of the people in everything they say to you. For, they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me. They will not let me reign over them. According to everything they have done since the time I brought them up out of Egypt until today, they have forsaken me, and served other gods, and they are doing this now to you. Now listen to them, but solemnly warn them what their kings will be like.”

The storyline of the prophets and kings is this: the kings led the people of Israel, the people continually disobeyed God in many different ways, and the prophets called the people to return to God and obey him...which they seldom did.

The third passage of Scripture is found in 2 Peter 3:9-10:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. But he is very patient with us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night.

This passage describes the fact that God wants everyone to repent and be saved, but eventually his patience will come to an end. There is no better way to describe the six-century period of the prophets and kings of Israel. God was incredibly patient with the Israelites hoping they would choose to honor their covenant and be his people, but eventually his patience ran out and the covenant came to an end.