Chapter Four
The Former Prophets

Introduction

The books of the Bible immediately following the Torah provide a continuous narrative account of ancient Israel's national history.

This history begins with the death of Moses and the Israelites' conquest of Canaanite territory as narrated in Joshua, but it soon devolves into a chaotic and violent period characterized by a succession of different rulers or judges as portrayed in Judges. Such instability helped create the yearning for a seemingly stronger form of political rule, and Samuel narrates Israel's transformation into a monarchy, which flourishes under David and then his son Solomon, despite a shaky launch under the rule of Israel's first king, Saul. Following the deaths of David and Solomon, Israel divides into two separate kingdoms and begins a long, slow descent leading to eventual destruction of first the Northern Kingdom of Israel and then the Southern Kingdom of Judah centered on Jerusalem, and the Book of Kings concludes with the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile and deportation of a large portion of the population.

These books are a part of the Nevi’im, or “Prophets,” the second main section of the Hebrew Bible, between the Torah and Ketuvim or Writings. The Nevi’im is traditionally divided into two parts: the Former Prophets, a set of historical narratives from Joshua through Kings, and the Latter Prophets, fifteen poetic and oratorical works, which will be treated in the next chapter. In the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Protestant arrangement for the Old Testament, Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings are included in a grouping of historical books. (see Chapter 2, Fig. 2)

Biblical scholarship—from the work of the German Martin Noth in the mid-twentieth century through Richard Elliott Friedman’s Who Wrote the Bible? (1987, 2nd ed. 1997) to the Robert Alter’s recent translation and commentary Ancient Israel: The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings (2013)—has helped us to understand how these books form a remarkably consistent, even unified narrative history of Israel from its emergence as a nation to its pinnacle under David and Solomon to its demise and the exile of its people.
These scholars often refer to this series of biblical texts as the “Deuteronomistic History.” The term derives from the guiding historiography that appears to shape these texts, which is derived from the Book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 28-30, Moses tells the people of Israel, at the end of their wandering in the wilderness and as they are on the verge of crossing the Jordan River into what will become their new land or Promised Land, that the Lord will bless them with prosperity and peace and protect them from their enemies, if they obey the LORD (Yahweh) God and his law as given in Deuteronomy. But if they do not obey the LORD and follow his commands, then disease, devastating weather, agricultural catastrophe, economic ruin, military defeat, diaspora, and more will all come to curse the new nation. It is a life or death offer that the LORD, via his prophet Moses, makes the Israelites:

If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him. (Deut. 30:16-20a).”

This Deuteronomistic principle informs the whole narrative history from the conquest of Canaan to the exile in Babylon. All major events are interpreted from this theological perspective: victory, prosperity, or success are all attributed to God’s blessings, the result of Israel’s obedience and faithfulness, just as defeat, death, and ruin are the LORD’s punishments for unfaithfulness (straying from monotheistic practices and beliefs, such as worshipping at Canaanite religious sites), disobedience, and moral failure. The primary aim of such a history is to interpret events in light of their religious or theological significance to the Israelites, the followers of the LORD or Yahweh.

One of the heroes of the Deuteronomistic History is King Josiah of Judah (640-609 BCE). During his reign, in 622 BCE, a set of scrolls was found in the temple, a moment depicted dramatically in Kings, when Hilkiah the high priest declares: “I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD” (2 Kings 22:8, NRSV). The phrase “the book of the law” is a translation of the Hebrew sefer hatorah, and sefer can mean book or scroll or written
document, while *hatorah* refers to instruction or teaching or law. The phrase is also used in Deuteronomy (29:21, 30:10, 31:26) and Joshua (1:8, 8:34). Although the view is not unanimous, the consensus among biblical scholars for the past two hundred years is that this “book of the law” (*sefer hatorah*) discovered in 622 BCE is the Book of Deuteronomy or some version of it, perhaps at least the legal portions.

More recently, a number of scholars have concluded that the Deuteronomistic History was written both before 622 BCE, when “the book of the law” was “found” in the temple and also after 586 BCE, the start of the Babylonian captivity and exile. The texts seem to have been changed, rather clearly at certain points, to reflect the changed fortunes of the people of Judah and the Davidic kings. In some places (the earlier versions), the narrative seems to have been written to culminate with Josiah and a heroic restoration of Yahweh-centered religion and Deuteronomistic practice, while the later editor or editors seem to have altered the text to adjust to the destruction of the Davidic line of kings and of Jerusalem itself.

The authorship of these narratives has not been conclusively determined. The most common theory is that a “Deuteronomistic School” of like-minded priests and scribes wrote the texts, both before 622 BCE and then after 586 BCE. While there is no direct proof to support the existence of such a school, it is a theory that perhaps provides the most feasible explanation of the historical and textual evidence. In *Who Wrote the Bible?* Friedman suggested that the prophet Jeremiah may have authored the Deuteronomistic History, but he changed his mind and revised his theory in the 1990s to suggest that it was not Jeremiah himself but rather Baruch, Jeremiah’s scribe and friend and likely author of the prose sections of the Book of Jeremiah. Friedman came to this new conclusion in part because he began to appreciate more clearly how differently historians (even theologically oriented ones) and prophets think about and write about their subjects, a difference that appears in their differing writing styles.

Other scholars have not gone so far as to associate the author of the Deuteronomistic History, sometimes known as the Deuteronomist, with any single individual in the Bible, perhaps in part because the various books differ so much from each other and often seem to be a pastiche of multiple texts and sources. As Alter points out in his Introduction to *Ancient Israel*, the extraordinary literary composition that is the story of David (stretching from 1 Samuel 8 to 1 Kings 2) “manifestly antedates the Deuteronomist, perhaps even by as much as three centuries” (Alter, *Ancient Israel*, xvii). The Deuteronomist appears to be highly didactic, spiritually focused, consistent, and clear. David’s story, however, is complex, at times worldly and realistic, and even ambiguous in intellectually and
affectively evocative ways. Joshua and Samuel display a high-degree of literary unity, while Judges and Kings often seem more fragmentary and chaotic, though a closer look can often reveal an underlying structural unity that is quite impressive if not quite as obvious.

While the authorship of the Deuteronomistic History may remain uncertain, we do know that these narratives were composed from a variety of sources in a range of genres: heroic saga or legend, historical annals, oratory, prophetic speeches, law including land apportionments, poetry, song, war hymns, fable, riddle, etiologies (narratives that explain the origin or meaning of something), among others. At times, these narratives refer explicitly to their sources, such as the Book of Jashar (Josh. 9:13, 2 Sam. 1:18) or the Book of the Acts of Solomon (1 Kings 11:41). Some of the Deuteronomistic History’s sources were clearly oral and others written, and editors or redactors may have played a significant and creative role in the eventual form these narratives took.

**Joshua and Judges**

Joshua and Judges cover the first era in ancient Israel’s national history, after the entry into Canaan but before the establishment of the monarchy. During this period, the people of Israel are not led by patriarchs like Abraham, prophets like Moses, or kings like David, but instead by judges (shofet) or deliverers. The judges are charismatic (spirit-filled) tribal military leaders who rise up to defend or protect Israel from its enemies. Israel is nearly surrounded on each side by hostile nations or groups: Philistines, Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, and Arameans, among others.

The two books share religious, military, and territorial themes. They both represent horrifying acts of violence, and they both contain passages that are morally shocking to many modern readers. Yet the two books are also strikingly different.

**Joshua**

The Book of Joshua is compact, spanning chronologically Joshua’s adult life from his assumption of leadership to his own death. It divides neatly into two parts, both united by a thematics of land. The first tells of the story of the conquest of Canaan (chs. 1-12), while the second provides an account of the tribal allotments of land (chs. 13-24), ending with Joshua’s farewell address, in which an elderly Joshua exhorts Israel’s leaders to heed their covenant with Yahweh, as outlined in Deuteronomy:
If you transgress the covenant of the LORD your God, which he enjoined on you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from the good land that he has given to you. (Josh. 24:16, NRSV)

The King James Version translate this passage even more ominously by rendering the conditional “if” into a prophetic “when”: “When ye have transgressed the covenant of the LORD your God ...” (Josh. 24:16a, KJV). Both translations, of course, emphasize that Israel’s ongoing peace, prosperity, and survival are predicated on the people’s faithful adherence to the Yahweh-centered monotheism of Joshua, Moses, Jacob, and Abraham.

Although the initial entrance into Canaan emphasizes intrigue (Rahab’s assistance to the two spies in chapter 2) and high symbolism (the crossing of the Jordan River and the circumcisions and celebration of Passover at Gilgal in chapters 2-5), the rest of the first section portrays the conquest of Canaan in idealized fashion. With the help of the LORD and the “commander of the army of the LORD” (Joshua 5:14), the army of Israel wins battle after battle against their Canaanite foes and invincible walled cities like Jericho (ch. 6) fall before Israel and the LORD. The one military defeat or set-back occurs at Ai, in chapter 7, after Achan had violated the ban (herem), the injunction to destroy all of the enemy population and all of their property and goods. Once Joshua discovers Achan’s sin—his appropriation of some war booty, a transgression of the LORD’s ban and thus an act of disobedience—Achan (and his family and animals!) are executed by stoning and fire. The punishment for this disobedience then clears the way for Israel’s second and successful assault on Ai and for its eventual conquest of “the whole land” (Josh. 11:23).

The second half of Joshua is less exciting narrative. With geographic detail, these chapters tell how the conquered territory are to be divided and apportioned to each of the tribes of Israel, with the Levites and their priestly families being allotted in assigned cities. This section ends with reminders of how the LORD has fulfilled his promises to Israel, a renewal of the covenant at Shechem, and the passing of an elderly and faithful Joshua and his peaceful burial in the Promised Land.

Yet this sense of total conquest and hard-won peace is shattered by the opening of Judges, when Israel engages in renewed fighting against the Canaanites. What seemed complete and utter in Joshua, now seems incomplete and partial and messy in Judges.

Judges
The Book of Judges opens with a picture of Israel having a tenuous or at least incomplete hold on Canaan. The tribe of Judah heads into battle against the Canaanites, and the initial attack is a successful one in which an enemy leader is pursued, captured, and then mutilated by having his thumbs and big toes chopped off. It’s a small detail about a figure who seems to have done as much or worse to his enemies, but it’s also a preview of the gruesome, sometimes odd, always quite physical violence that characterizes the entire book.

Moreover, we learn that Israel has not completely driven out the Canaanites—one of the LORD’s commands from Deuteronomy 20 and one of the impressions that the Book of Joshua seems to leave with readers—but instead they are working as slave labor, “so these Canaanites lived among them” (Judg. 1:30, NIV). Although they have conquered and dominated their enemies, the Israelites also appear to have adopted aspects of Canaanite culture, including the worship of Baal and other pagan gods.

Such clear disobedience to the LORD and Yahweist monothesim becomes the first step in the recurring plot cycle that defines Judges. Disobedience provokes the Lord’s anger and the withdrawal of his support, which enables Israel’s enemies to defeat and subjugate them. From out of this oppression, the Israelites repent of their sin, cry for deliverance, and turn to the LORD, who then raises up a judge (shofet, who is more of a spirit-filled guerilla leader than a legal authority) who vanquishes their oppressors. After a period of peace, however, the Israelites eventually backslide into disobedience and “what was evil in the sight of the LORD” (Judg. 6:1), which begins again the cycle of disobedience—subjection—repentance—emergence of a judge—victory or deliverance—peace.

Over the course of twelve judges and one evil anti-judge (Abimelech in ch. 9), this story repeats itself again and again for most of the book. Some of these characters are quite minor, meriting only a few verses: Shamgar (3:31), Tola and Jair (10:1-5), Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon (12:8-15). Others are fascinating figures, sometimes noble, sometimes odd, and sometimes complex:

- Othniel, the first judge (3:7-11)
- Ehud, whose slaying of Eglon, the Moabite King, is presented in a comically off-color manner (3:12-20)
- Deborah (chs. 4-5), a prophet and one of the greatest judges, whose military/victory song in chapter 5 may be one of the oldest texts in the Bible
- Gideon (chs. 6-8), who is called by an angel or messenger of the Lord and who then sees remarkable battlefield success
• Jephthah (chs. 10-12), whose story of military victory ends with the tragic and bizarre ritual sacrifice of his only daughter “as a burnt offering” (11:31)

Yet from all of the enthralling stories in Judges, the birth, rise, fall, and death of Samson (chs. 13-16) remains the most famous and resonant. Like Isaac or Samuel (see below) among other important biblical figures, he is the son of a mother who assumed she was infertile, a son who is from birth to be consecrated to God and to a special life dedicated to following in His ways. Like Jacob or David, he is tough and strong – even preternaturally strong like a number of demigod figures from other traditions (such as Gilgamesh, Heracles, or Maui). And, like so many of the narratives in Judges, Samson’s story features striking, unusual scenes of violence: in chapter 15, for example, Samson attacks the Philistines first with 300 foxes whose tails have been set on fire and then famously with “a fresh jawbone of a donkey” (Judg.15:15). But from a literary perspective what perhaps gives Samson’s narrative its depth and dimension is not simply the larger-than-life heroic elements or the strange and striking violence or the folktale-like structures (riddles, thrice-repeated patterns, magical or miraculous acts, etc.).

The story’s narrative power might also be related to its portrayal of Samson’s unconventional relationships with three different women: his Philistine bride (yet another example from Judges of how the Israelites seem to have mixed and blended with other Near Eastern peoples and cultures rather than destroyed or separated themselves from them), the prostitute he visits in Gaza, and, most famously, Delilah, whom we are told he loves and who betrays him (after three earlier tries) to the Philistines, once she discovers that his supernatural power comes his never-shorn hair. Bereft of his strength, Samson is finally captured by the Philistines who “gouged out his eyes” (16:21). They add to the manacled Samson’s pain and humiliation by forcing him to entertain them. Then in one final prayer of deliverance and revenge, Samson asks the Lord to restore his
strength so that he might topple the central pillar of the temple, destroying it and all of the people in it, including himself. In some respects, Delilah resembles some of the other deadly women in this book—such as Jael who runs a tent peg through the skull of a Canaanite captain named Sisera (Judg.4:21) or the woman who throws a millstone on Abimelech’s head (Judg.9:53)—who destroy men by targeting their heads. (Is this a metaphor for outsmarting them?) Yet Delilah is not a heroine, but a seductive and perhaps ambiguous villain. Samson’s relationships with these three women play out in one of Judges’s most-used storylines, the downward spiral, the from-bad-to-worse-to-OMG plot. First, he attempts to marry the Philistine woman from Timnah—marriage to gentiles is generally scorned in Judges, but the matrimonial relationship is a lawful one. His next relationship is with the “whore-woman” (16:1, Alter), a sign of Samson’s further moral disintegration. And then he “fell in love with” (16:4, NIV) Delilah, whose seduction would lead to his ultimate destruction.

While Samson’s dramatic destruction of himself and his enemies might seem an ideal ending to the downward spiral of Judges, it gets worse—not in a strictly chronological manner, but in a flashback epilogue composed of two stories that do not directly involve the feats of judges but instead attempt to capture through an epitome the nature of the era between Joshua and Samuel. The first story is about an Ephraimite named Micah who first steals 1100 silver shekels (the exact amount, by the way, that the Philistines paid Delilah to betray Samson) from his mother and then uses part of the money to create a private idol and shrine, apparently to honor Yahweh, though, of course faithful Israelites reject the use of such images for such purposes (“You shall not make for yourself an idol” [Exod. 20:4]). When the Danites move through his country, apparently migrating from the tribal allotment given them in Joshua, they take Micah’s idol and make it their own. The second strange story in this epilogue is even darker, much darker. In this story that echoes Lot’s willingness to let a mob of men rape his two daughters in Sodom (Gen. 19), a group of men in the town of Gibeah in Benjaminite territory pound at the door of an old man’s house demanding that he send out a Levite traveler “so that we may have intercourse with him” (Judg.19:22). The old man offers them instead his virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine. After an apparently confusing moment of negotiation, the Levite (fearing for his own safety?) brings his concubine out to them, and they gang rape her through the night and into the morning, when she dies. The Levite responds to this savage crime by hacking his concubine’s dead body into twelve pieces and sending those pieces to each of the twelve tribes of Israel, an act that spurs a civil war in which the other eleven tribes attack the Benjaminites and burn all of their cities. Horror upon horror upon horror.
There are perhaps a variety of ways to interpret the decision to end Judges with the juxtaposition of two unrelated and unchronological stories about bad people doing bad things. One interpretation might emphasize how the first theological sin of Micah’s idolatry leads to a social world filled with the atrocities that follow—theft, and then rape, murder, desecration of the dead, civil war, and destruction. Other readers might counter by noting that these stories of brutality, chaos, and violence seem excessive; they seem to go well beyond simply making an unambiguous moral point. Judges itself concludes with a powerful moment of understatement: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (Judg. 21:25, NIV). This finishing moral thematically begins the transition to the Book of Samuel, where issues of kingship and order will take center stage. But it also leaves readers with a profoundly disturbing reminder of how the loss of a moral center can lead to a frighteningly chaotic and dystopian world that doesn’t simply fluctuate between bad times and good times but can actually spin out of control in ways that no one can fix.

1 and 2 Samuel

The story of Samuel, Saul, and especially David narrated in 1 and 2 Samuel is one of the greatest works in all of literary history. With its psychologically complex characters, clever wordplay, and compelling and sometimes elaborate plots, this riveting masterpiece tells the story of the emergence of Israel’s monarchy. Although the kingdom seems initially to falter under the rule of King Saul, it eventually flourishes under the rule of its complex, charismatic, shrewd, faithful, and flawed second king, David. Yet, at the seeming pinnacle of his success, David travels down a dark path of adultery, deceit, and murder, which wrecks his family and unravels his control of the kingdom. A humbled David eventually reasserts his reign over his kingdom, but his family has been devastated and the seeds have been sown for the eventual schism of his realm into northern and southern kingdoms.

First and Second Samuel are not really two different books of the Bible but instead tell a continuous narrative. The reason for the division into two books is that the narrative was too long for a single scroll. When the Greek translators of the Hebrew Bible were preparing their edition, known as the Septuagint, they separated Samuel into two roughly equal parts. The book or books are named after Samuel, the narrative’s first protagonist, the prophet who anoints King Saul and then King David.

Tradition and the Babylonian Talmud identify Samuel, Nathan, and Gad (the three prophets who appear in the book) as the authors of Samuel. A significant body of modern
scholarship has suggested, however, that the text looks as if it were composed by multiple anonymous authors. These scholars emphasize the seeming diversity of sources (one of which, the Book of Jashar, is named in the narrative itself [see 2 Sam. 11:8]) as well as the obviously tacked-on appendices that conclude 2 Samuel (chs. 21-24). There is also the issue of the apparently conflicting or contradictory perspectives on the monarchy within Samuel: Are kings a good thing or a bad thing? Does the LORD sanction the emergence of a monarchy in Israel, or are secular kings an intrinsically bad idea for the nation of the LORD’s chosen people? Is this book a propagandistic defense of David’s rule or a critique of it? Although his work has not been able to definitively settle these questions of authorship, Robert Alter has noted not only a great deal of narrative unity or cohesion within the text but a high degree of artistic intention.

First Samuel opens with a vivid narrative of Samuel’s calling by the Lord (1 Sam. 1-3). In sharp contrast to the simple and calm story of Samuel’s birth and calling are the chaotic accounts of Israel’s encounters with the Philistines, who capture the ark of the covenant, though it is eventually returned, and the Philistines defeated under Samuel’s leadership (1 Sam. 4-7). The middle section of 1 Samuel focuses on Israel’s demand for a king and the reign of the first king, Saul (1 Sam. 8-15). Although the LORD asks Samuel to anoint Saul king, his reign appears to be characterized by a series of missteps, mistakes, misunderstandings, and bad choices, which culminate in Saul’s decision to imprison rather than execute Agag, the king of Amalekites, in opposition to the LORD’s instructions (see 1 Sam. 15). At this point, the text explains that “the LORD was sorry he had made Saul king” (1 Sam. 15:35).

Samuel then, at the LORD’s command, anoints a young shepherd named David to be king (1 Sam. 16). Although Saul continues to rule as king throughout the remainder and final third part of 1 Samuel, until he falls on his sword in chapter 31, the narrative focus moves from Saul to David. At first, David is very much a part of Saul’s court, playing music to soothe an agitated monarch and defeating the Philistine champion Goliath (1 Sam. 16-17), and David establishes a close friendship with Saul’s son Jonathan and marries Saul’s daughter Michal (1 Sam. 18). In Saul’s eyes, however, David has become an enemy to be defeated and killed. Strategically and diplomatically astute, David uses deception and his unrivaled skill as a guerilla fighter to evade repeatedly Saul’s lethal fury, until Saul finally commits suicide following his defeat at Philistine hands at the Battle of Gilboa (1 Sam. 31).

Second Samuel begins with David’s expansion of power in the wake of Saul’s death. He becomes first King of Judah and then King over all of Israel (2 Sam. 2-5). In the process of expanding and defining his kingdom, he captures Jerusalem, conquers the Philistines, and
brings the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5-8). Later, he will also defeat Ammon and Aram (2 Sam. 10). In the midst of this success, the Lord establishes an eternal covenant with David, telling him, through the prophet Nathan, “your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:16). By the end of 2 Samuel 8, we learn that David “won a name for himself” (8:13), “reigned over all Israel” (8:15), and “administered justice and equity to all his people” (8:15).

But in one of the most stunning plot reversals in all literature, this amazing narrative does not end “happily ever after.” Instead, it all falls apart. This long conclusion begins quietly, “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle” (2 Sam. 11:1). We learn quickly, however, that this king and great military leader has not gone to battle, but he is instead at home, laying on his couch, puttering around the roof, and watching his beautiful neighbor Bathsheba bathe. David is clearly not where he ought to be, but the tragic consequences that follow seem to escalate quickly. He sends for the already married Bathsheba, they have sex, and she conceives. David’s attempt to cover up this adulterous affair culminates in the murder of Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah.

The Lord then sends the prophet Nathan to condemn David’s sin and disgraceful abuse of power. The consequences for his wrongdoing fall not only on David but also on the family he loves and cherishes. His infant son, born to him by Bathsheba, dies (2 Sam. 12:15-23). David’s oldest son and the heir to the throne, Amnon, rapes his half-sister, Tamar. Another of David’s son, the attractive and charismatic and David-like Absalom, seeks revenge for the rape of his full sister, Tamar, and kills Amnon (2 Sam. 13). Although he initially flees Jerusalem in the wake of the murder he has committed, Absalom returns three years later, incites and then leads a popular rebellion, and declares himself king. David’s forces eventually defeat Absalom, and Absalom dies memorably after his head gets stuck in a tree while riding a mule. As Absalom is suspended in the air, the commander of David’s army, Joab, “took three spears in his hand, and thrust them into the heart of Absalom” (2 Sam. 18:14). After quelling one more rebellion, David regains control of his kingdom, but the cost of David’s wrongdoing and the consequences for his family have been staggering for him. Instead of celebrating his victory, David just weeps: “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Sam. 18:33).

First and Second Samuel conclude with a chiastically structured series of stories that have not been chronologically woven into the primary narrative of David’s rise and fall and sad recovery (2 Sam. 21-24).
1 and 2 Kings

The histories of Israel and Judah from Solomon’s death in 922 BCE to the rebuilding of the Temple in 520-515 BCE are complex, sometimes confusing, and crisis-ridden. This is also the great era of the prophets from Ahijah and Elijah in 1 Kings to Amos and Hosea (whose works may signal a shift from spoken to written prophecies), to the incomparable Isaiah (or Isaias), to the gradual disappearance of the great Hebrew prophetic tradition following the post-exilic restoration of a remnant of Jews to Judea.

For a chart that will help you sort out who was king in Israel, who was king in Judah, and who was active as prophet, and at what point, you might consult this chart at the BibleGateway site, “Chart of Israel’s and Judah’s Kings and Prophets”:


The divided monarchy eventually comes to an end as a succession of three big dominant powers conquer first the Northern Kingdom, Israel, and then the Southern Kingdom, Judah.

- **Assyria. 721-612 BCE.** In the eighth century, Assyria militarily dominates most of the Middle East, eventually conquering the Kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE and forcibly deporting the ten northern tribes to places throughout the Assyrian empire.

- **Babylon. 612-539 BCE.** Near the end of the seventh century, the Assyrian empire falls, and the Neo-Babylonian or Chaldean empire becomes the region’s dominant power. In the early part of the sixth century, Jerusalem (and with it the southern Kingdom of Judah) falls to the Babylonians, who imprison Judah’s upper classes and deport them to Babylon. The fall of Judah occurs in 597 BCE, with the destruction of Jerusalem following in 586/587 BCE.
• **Persia, 539-330 BCE.** In 539 BCE, Cyrus captures Babylon and establishes the Persian empire. In the following year, he frees the Jews, and the remnant of a Jewish nation begins its return to Judah and Jerusalem and the rebuilding of its society.

The Kings narrative, like Samuel, is a continuous account divided into two parts by the Septuagint translators. It begins with an account of David’s final days and Solomon’s accession to the throne of a united monarchy. Kings ends with the fall of Judah, the siege and plunder of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army, and the destruction of Solomon’s Temple. Thus, it covers a period from roughly 970 BCE, when Israel was a dominant power in the Near East, to 586 BCE, when the last vestige of an Israelite kingdom, Judah, was vanquished and its capital city razed.

The initial section of First Kings (chs. 1-11) provides a rich and interesting account of Solomon’s reign. For the most part, the stories that surround Solomon are positive, even celebratory. He is known for his wealth (ch. 10), his wives (ch. 11), and his wisdom (chs. 3-4). He orders and oversees the building a magnificent temple and an opulent palace (chs. 5-9). Although his relationship with the LORD appears to be strong and intimate, and although his reign is generally characterized by great political, military, and economic strength, the “wise” Solomon turns foolish in his old age. Kings tells us that he turns from his deep and complete monotheistic devotion to the LORD and begins to construct idolatrous places of worship for his pagan wives. Solomon’s disobedience angers the LORD, “who had appeared to him [Solomon] twice, and had commanded him concerning this matter, that he should not follow other gods” (1 Kings 11:10), which, according to Kings, leads to war, rebellion, and the eventual division of Israel into two separate kingdoms. To the south, the House of David retained control of Jerusalem and the tribe of Judah, becoming the Kingdom of Judah. The tribe of Benjamin aligned itself with Judah shortly thereafter. The remaining tribes established a northern kingdom of Israel, ruled initially but Jeroboam I, who had led the rebellion against Rehoboam, Solomon’s son and successor to the throne.

The story of Solomon’s rise and fall (1 Kings 1:1-12:24) is an exemplary and well-crafted instance of chiastic narrative structure. The remaining sections of 1 and 2 Kings, however, can seem at times chaotic, a mere record of events, without the same kind of absorbing literary artistry used to tell the lives of David and his son. There are, of course, stunning stories of royal evil. The most famous of these, for example, might be the narratives about King Ahab and his wife, the Phoenician princess Jezebel, who murders the prophets of the
Lord (1 Kings 18:13) and even poor Naboth, the owner of small vineyard that Ahab desires (1 Kings 21).

On the other hand, despite a few exceptions such as Ahab and Jezebel, it is perhaps not the succession of wicked, disobedient, and misguided Kings that makes the remainder of Kings so interesting and important. It is, instead, witnessing the rise of powerful prophets—most notably Elijah (1 Kings 12-22, 2 Ki. 1-2) and Elisha (2 Kings 2-13). These prophets courageously challenge the wealthy and corrupt rulers of Judah and Israel, stand with the outcast and demand social justice, carry on the uncompromising Yahwism of Moses and David, and perform a variety of stunning miracles that reveal the presence of the LORD’s power in an otherwise dark and oppressive era.

The ministries of Elijah and Elisha transpire mostly in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, where from Jeroboam I (1 Kings 12-14) to Hoshea (2 Kings 17) and the fall of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria in 722 BCE, there is an almost unrelievedly corrupt, abusive, and evil succession of kings who fail to uphold their covenant with the LORD to have only one God and to worship no others. (The Northern Kingdom seems to have much needed prophets like Elijah and Elisha!) Even the one possible exception to this dishonorable succession of Kings, the reign of Jehu (2 Ki. 9-10), is hardly a true exception. Jehu’s story begins with great promise. He is anointed king by Elisha in a secret ceremony, and he seems to be a dedicated Yahwist. Yet, according to Kings, his Yahwism is extreme, violent, even bloodthirsty. He orders the killing of Jezebel in a gruesome scene that features him eating and drinking, while dogs devour her body. He slaughters all of Ahab’s family, friends, and supporters. And then he deceitfully hosts a ceremony in the temple of Baal (a Phoenician and Canaanite god of fertility), inviting people “throughout all Israel” (2 Ki. 10:21) to attend. His purpose is to assemble as many Baal worshippers as he can in one place, so that his eighty men, armed with swords, can execute every last one of them: “let no one escape,” Jehu commands (2 Kings 10:25). Although he acted with savage violence at times, he was not a strong or effective king, and Israel’s power and territory steadily diminished during his reign. The Assyrian monument known as the Black Obelisk, currently held at the British Museum, depicts Jehu humbling himself at the feet of King Shalmaneser III of Assyria, which seems to be a revealing image of this ruler who aspired to be a strongman but failed. (Wikipedia has a photo of the Jehu scene on this obelisk at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Jehu-Obelisk-cropped.jpg.) Despite his apparently extremist devotion to his faith, Jehu himself is ultimately not faithful (see 2 Kings 10:31).
Less than a century later, despite the efforts of later prophets like Amos and Hosea, Israel falls completely under Assyrian control, much of the population is deported or relocated, and the Northern Kingdom is extinguished.

In the southern kingdom, the succession of evil kings is sometimes punctuated by the appearance of a good king such as Jehoshaphat (1 Kings 22) or Hezekiah (2 Kings 22-20). One of the most important is King Josiah. During his reign, Hilkiah the high priest re-discovers “the book of the law” (2 Kings 22:8) in the temple, which heralds a new era, a righteous restoration of Yahweh-centered religion and Deuteronomistic practice throughout Judah. Despite these religious reforms and Josiah’s religious faithfulness, Josiah is killed by the Egyptian Pharaoh Neco (or his army) at the Battle of Megiddo (2 Kings 23:39). Josiah’s sons and successors do not continue his Torah-based reforms. And Judah falls under the control of the Egyptians and then the Neo-Babylonian Empire, before the Babylonians ultimately capture and destroy Jerusalem in 587/586 BCE—prophesied, described, and lamented in beautiful but poignant language by the great prophet Jeremiah—and end the Southern Kingdom, the reign of the House of David, and the covenant-based nation promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion

1. Compare the figure of Joshua to Moses. What are the most interesting similarities? What are the most important differences? Then compare Joshua to Samson. What are the most interesting similarities? What are the key differences?

2. Compare Book of Joshua to Book of Judges. What are the most interesting similarities? What are the most important differences?

3. Is there a plot pattern that unifies the stories in Judges? What about Joshua? Make an outline or draw a chart or a map that visualizes that pattern.

4. Make a list of the more violent, disturbing scenes in Joshua and Judges. How do you understand these scenes? What is the purpose of each scene? Where is the goal humor, or entertainment, or aesthetic provocation, or instillation of national pride, or theological warning, or moral guidance, or something else entirely? How would you morally or ethically defend the representation of violence? What would you criticize and why?
5. Make a chart of the women characters in Joshua and Judges. What roles do they play in these narratives? What patterns do you see? How and why are they significant figures to the story?

6. Draw a map or graph or picture of Israelite society in the era of Joshua and Judges. Is it hierarchy or does it have some other structure? Does it change from Moses to Samson? If so, how? If not, what continuities do you see? Is it multicultural and inclusive or mono-cultural and exclusive social world? How does its leadership work in Joshua? In Judges?

7. What are the attitudes toward strangers, aliens, and others in Joshua and Judges? Is it similar to or different from the attitudes in the Torah? Explain. What do these biblical texts seem to say about strangers, immigrants, and outsiders?

8. Consider the literary quality of each text. In your view, which is the better literary text: Joshua or Judges? Why? Some features to contemplate as you develop your position might include any of the following:

   - The connections between the forms of the narratives and their meanings
   - The artistry in the structure of the plots
   - Innovation, creativity, surprise, originality, and wonder
   - The artistry of the language
   - The narrative’s complexity
   - The skill or craft used in composition of the text as a whole
   - Character originality and interest and character development
   - The text’s emotional intensity or power
   - Thematic patterns
   - The text’s meaning
   - The text’s theological and philosophical profundity

9. Why does this story of national and monarchial struggle begin with the quiet story of Hannah and Samuel as a little boy?

10. What is the role of the Philistines in 1 and 2 Samuel? Why begin the story of the eventual kingdom with the story about the loss of the ark of the covenant?

11. Why are these books named after Samuel and not Saul or David? What is Samuel’s role here? Who is he?
12. Describe Saul. Where and how do things go wrong for him? What is interesting or significant about the way he dies?

13. What happens in 1 Samuel, Ch. 15, the battle with Amalek? What makes this chapter important to the rest of the story? What does it tell us about Saul? About Samuel?

14. Are kings a good thing or a bad thing? Does the LORD sanction the emergence of a monarchy in Israel, or are secular kings an intrinsically bad idea for the nation of the LORD’s chosen people?

15. In what ways is the brief story of David and Goliath important to the rest of Samuel?

16. Describe David. Why is he seen as a complex character? Why would literary critics be especially interested in him? What is unusual or unexpected about him and his character? Why doesn’t he kill Saul? Why does he lament over the deaths of Saul, Jonathan, and Abner? What various stories do we hear about David’s origin?

17. How does David differ from Saul?

18. What is the covenant that the LORD makes with David? Why is it significant to what becomes before and after it in the Bible?

19. Interpret 2 Sam. 12.1-4. What is this story about? What does it mean? What does it do? Why does Nathan present it as a story rather than a charge? How does this conversation distinguish the Israelites from the other nations?

20. Once David consolidates his power and achieves triumph, what happens to him? How does David act improperly here?

21. What is most interesting, most important, and most meaningful about the various and sometimes intricate set of stories that follow David’s affair with Bathsheba – the stories of Amnon, Tamar, Absalom, Ahithophel, Joab, etc.?

22. What are David’s dying words (1 Kings 2)? Do they seem appropriate, expected? Inappropriate, revealing, surprising?
23. Compare David to Solomon What makes David special, according to Samuel and Kings?

24. The United Kingdom seems so strong initially. Why does it divide? According to you? According to the author of Kings?

25. Describe the typical “good” king characters as they appear in Kings. List the characteristics or qualities of this figure and provide some specific examples that illustrate the most important of these features.

26. Describe the typical “bad” king characters as they appear in Kings. List the characteristics or qualities of this figure and provide some specific examples that illustrate the most important of these features.

27. Describe the prophet in Kings. List the characteristics or qualities of this figure and provide some specific examples that illustrate the most important of these features.

28. Using a king or prophet or perhaps a specific story as an illustrative example, discuss how 1 and 2 Kings operates as Deuteronomistic history.

Works Cited and Further Reading


