

# OLD TESTAMENT INTRODUCTION

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# Kings to Lead

## Look at: *1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, and 1 & 2 Chronicles*

Samuel—prophet and judge—initiated the monarchy to maintain Israel's national identity and hold the country together. For about 100 years the country functioned successfully as a United Kingdom, but King Solomon's ruthless efficiency was detested by the northern tribes, and after his reign they broke away.

For the next 200 years two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south, coexisted. They were sometimes at war, sometimes in alliance; sometimes seeking to live as God's covenant people, more often turning away from God and ignoring the demands of the Law and the covenant. In 722 B.C. the northern capital, Samaria, fell to the Assyrians, Israel was exiled, and the Northern Kingdom ceased to exist.

Beyond this outline, the story revolves around people, their interrelationships, and their relationship with God. We learn about the lives of ordinary people, particularly in accounts of the work of Elijah and Elisha and in the writings of the prophets Amos, Hosea, and Micah. However, most of the records focus on the rulers and how they used and abused their power.

### Samuel

Samuel can be seen as the last of the judges or the first genuine national leader since Joshua. He was a prophet, priest, and king-maker, who succeeded in holding the people together and making them think about God. He did not cling to power himself, but handed over authority, first to Saul and then to David.

### Saul

Saul, the first king of Israel, was

chosen and called, but was not faithful. He was little different from the judges, except that his leadership was officially recognized and more permanent. But Saul became more interested in his kingly status than in the task God gave him; he began to assume that he could overrule God's commands—and therefore was replaced.

### David

Although David never sought the crown during Saul's lifetime, when Saul died in battle he was pleased to take it. After initial skirmishes with Saul's son Ishbosheth, David took over the entire kingdom. Though a good soldier and diplomat, a committed believer, and an able poet, he had a number of serious failings. He controlled the kingdom but did not always control himself or his own family, and he experienced major problems with his sons.

### Solomon

Solomon was in many ways the most gifted king of Israel. He

inherited his father David's poetic skills, was a gifted scholar, and brought prosperity to the nation. However, he led a life alien to God's pattern of kingship in Israel. Deuteronomy 17 states that kings should avoid stockpiling wealth, dependence on military strength, idolatry, polygamy, and oppressive rule; Solomon's reign was characterized by all these.

### Rehoboam

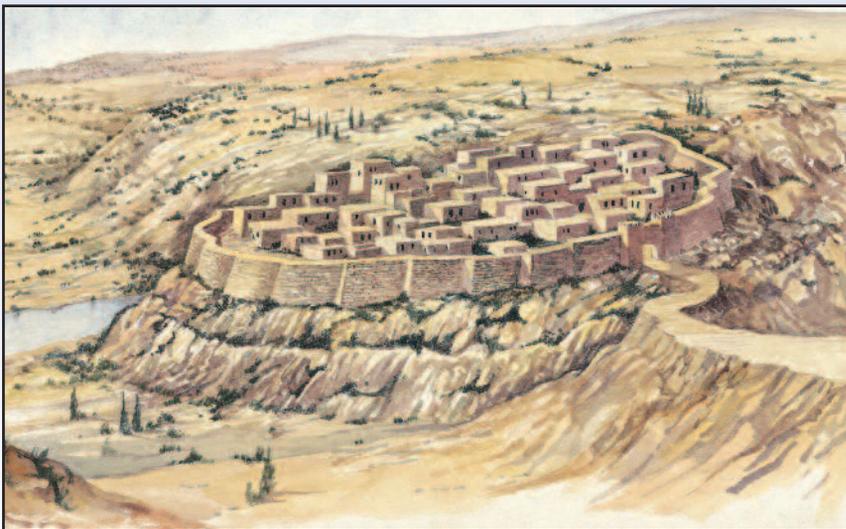
Solomon's son Rehoboam did not inherit his father's gifts, but he followed his father's oppression of the people. It is not surprising that the northern tribes rejected his kingship.

### The world at large

In addition to the regular feuding between northern Israel and southern Judah, Israel's relationships with surrounding nations were often strained.

In the northwest, Tyre (in modern Lebanon) was normally friendly toward Israel. In the north, Syria was growing more powerful, sometimes acting as an ally but more often as an enemy, devastating farms in border raids. East of Israel, Ammon, Moab, and Edom caused the Jews problems, although after Solomon's reign they were weaker than Israel and Judah, and easily contained. To the south, Egypt was declining in power,

David defeated the Jebusite inhabitants and made Jerusalem his capital city.





But now your kingdom will not continue; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart; and the LORD has appointed him to be ruler over his people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you.  
1 Samuel 13:14

while Greece, to the west, was growing in influence: Homer was writing at this time, and the first Olympic Games took place at the time when the Northern Kingdom of Israel was disappearing. However, Greek influence had not yet reached so far east.

Assyria, to the northeast, beyond Ammon and Syria, was emerging

as the dominant power in the region. The Assyrian Empire initiated magnificent architectural schemes, but was famously cruel, with military power the key to its status.

Israel and Judah were situated on important trade routes between Egypt and Assyria. Particularly in the late ninth and early eighth centuries B.C., they had great opportunities for economic growth. Assyria first dominated then destroyed Syria, and for a time Israel was left to her own devices. But this period of prosperity proved to be illusory, and Israel was in turn destroyed.

### Israel: The Northern Kingdom

There were 19 kings of Israel, starting with Jeroboam. Although his reign began well, Jeroboam soon became more concerned with

### Reading between the lines

1. A good beginning is no guarantee of continuing faithfulness.
2. God will not give up on His people—but those who completely reject the covenant will be allowed to live with the consequences of their decision.
3. Economic prosperity and disaster were both used to make the nation recognize their need for God; but the people had to respond in obedience and faith. Prosperity is not in itself evidence that God approves of the nation's behavior.

maintaining power than obeying God. In the Books of Kings, all 19 kings are described as “evil”; but these books were compiled in the south, and their assessments may not be unbiased.

Nevertheless, despite the ministry of such prophets as Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea, and the existence of many true believers, Israel eventually ceased to be part of God's covenant people. 2 Kings 17 serves as an epitaph for the Northern Kingdom, making it clear that its demise was totally deserved.

### Judah: The Southern Kingdom

During this same period, there were 12 rulers in Judah—11 kings and the notorious queen Athaliah, who killed her own grandchildren to retain her throne. Seven kings, six of whom reigned for 25 years or more, are described as “doing what was right in the eyes of the Lord”—though this does not mean that their reigns were perfect, as the writings of the prophets Micah and Isaiah make clear.

Corruption, injustice, and idolatry do not seem to have been much less common than in Israel. However, the “good” kings did make some attempt to lead the people within the requirements of the covenant. Possibly this led God to be merciful to Judah, so that the kingdom lasted for a further hundred years before being conquered by Babylon.





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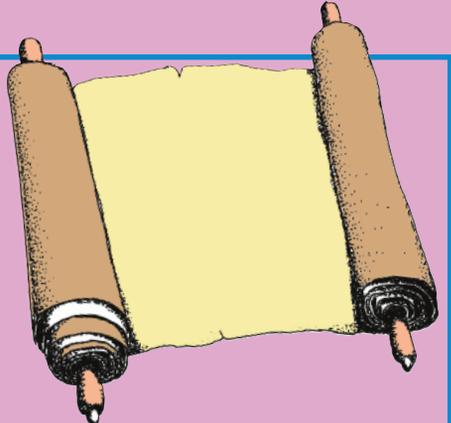
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