

## **Lesson One: Intro and History**

### **Objective of Lesson One:**

The objective of Lesson One is to set the scene for the study of Elijah. We will briefly cover themes for 1 and 2 Kings as well as some background information. We will learn about important characters that play into the story of Elijah, including facts that are known from secular history. We will begin discussing polytheism, specifically the worship of Canaanite gods. Many classes will have some knowledge of the following material due to our spring Bible Class study of 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings. Please use the following as a guide for reviewing your class and helping them learn more specific background information for our current study.

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### **Review**

1 and 2 Kings were originally written as one book. It was probably first composed shortly before the fall of Jerusalem, and put into its final form after the fall of Jerusalem making the exiled Israelite community the original audience.

The book describes the death of Israel as a nation. The first sign of illness is when Solomon begins to worship idols. The second sign of illness is when the kingdom splits between Rehoboam (Davidic line in Judah) and Jeroboam (Israel: ten tribes form Northern Kingdom). The consequences at this point are disastrous with the empire of David and Solomon being lost almost overnight - Israel had dominated the Arameans, Philistines, Ammonites and Moabites during David and Solomon's reign, but they lose

this domination. Over 200 years later, Assyria destroys Northern Israel. Later, Babylon conquers Judah and levels Jerusalem. In all, almost 400 years pass in 1 and 2 Kings. David dies in 970 BC; the Northern Kingdom falls to Assyria in 722 BC, and the Southern Kingdom falls to Babylon in 587 BC. (House & Mitchell, **year**)

Although the book of Kings covers some historical details, it is more concerned with the theological evaluation of the monarchy than with the details of its history. The writer of Kings is always more concerned with Israel's relationship with God and the kings' relationship with God than in how the country is doing economically, militarily, etc. Israel's future is determined by its relationship to God more than by any other factor.

As we read 1 & 2 Kings, we see how God works in the middle of the messiness of human will and actions. The author continues to show us throughout the book how God's will is being worked out in the midst of the chaos of history. It may seem like people are in control, but God is always ultimately in control.

The Rival States:

- Judah: smaller and poorer than Israel, has a more homogeneous population than Israel, is relatively isolated geographically; and has a stable dynastic tradition (from the house of David)
- Israel: larger and wealthier than Judah; with 10 tribes, has more of the sense of a tribal system but also has a large Canaanite population; due to its geography is more exposed to outside influence; has no stable dynastic tradition

### **Characters:**

- Prophets are books' most impressive characters with Elijah and Elisha playing starring roles
- Assyria and Babylon are major characters - both hovering over the action, waiting to attack
- Kings- if kings don't worship idols, they are good kings; if they offer sacrifices only in Jerusalem, they are even better; if they destroy idols and bring spiritual renewal, they receive complete approval - but failure in any of these, brings nations catastrophe (House & Mitchell, 2007)

### **Quick review of Solomon:**

#### **What is Solomon's relationship with God like when he first becomes king?**

Solomon starts out asking God for wisdom and receiving it along with wealth. He is famous for his wisdom and his wealth. He builds a temple for God and brings in the ark of the covenant.

#### **How does he change?**

Solomon marries many wives - probably most for political alliances. He ends up with 700 wives and 300 concubines, an excessive violation of Deuteronomy 17:17, "He [the king] must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver or gold." His love of women and wealth leads to his downfall. He starts to worship his wives' gods and even builds worship places for them (I Kings 11:4-9). He breaks the covenant he has with God by no longer serving only God, so

God tells him that part of the kingdom will be torn away from his family although he will leave a small part for the sake of David (I Kings 11:9-13).

**What sin does Solomon commit that David never did?**

Worshipping of idols

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After Solomon, the kingdom splits. Jeroboam becomes the king of the Northern Kingdom and has a difficult job ahead of him. He has to create a state where none existed.

**Read I Kings 12:26-33**

**Why is Jeroboam afraid of the people offering sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem?**

He is afraid that if he allows the Israelites to return to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices, they will go back over to Rehoboam, Solomon's son, the king of Judah. Ancient kings required theological legitimacy. The Israelites continually returning to the Jerusalem Temple would have weakened loyalty to Jeroboam. When they returned, they would have been celebrating Yahweh's eternal covenant with David. Jeroboam does not want his people participating in a religion that declares that only Davidic rule is legitimate!

**What does Jeroboam do to keep the people from returning to Jerusalem?**

He starts a new religion to serve his interests instead of God's and the people's, reversing Moses' teachings:

**Deuteronomy 12:4-7**

These are the decrees and laws you must be careful to follow in the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has given you to possess—as long as you live in the land.

**2** Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains, on the hills and under every spreading tree, where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. **3** Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places.

**4** You must not worship the Lord your God in their way. **5** But you are to seek the place the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling. To that place you must go; **6** there bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. **7** There, in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the Lord your God has blessed you.

Instead of following this command, and allowing his people to go back to Jerusalem to the temple, Jeroboam makes two golden calves and teaches the nation that these gods delivered Israel from Egypt. He builds shrines in Bethel and Dan (opposite sides of the realm) where the calves can be worshipped. He builds shrines on the high places (places where sacrifices were made) and appoints priests who are not Levites. He

starts rival festivals to those held in Jerusalem. Jeroboam uses religion for his own political gain. He uses religion as a tool of power - not as true worship of God.

Because of his idolatry and evil ways, God rejects him and his household. Once he dies, Jeroboam is only remembered as the man who led the people away from God. He becomes the book's example of what it means to sin against God.

Jeroboam's son takes over as king when Jeroboam dies, but he is quickly overthrown by Baasha, according to what the prophet Ahijah prophesies (I Kings 14:10-11).

Baasha rules for 24 years, doing evil in the eyes of the Lord. For the writer of Kings, the most important criteria in evaluating the kings is their wickedness- especially in how they have followed the ways of Jeroboam. All the reports are approximately the same length - Baasha's reign does not get much more space than the reigns of kings who reigned for much less time than he did. These reports are not supposed to be read as an unbiased, factual history of the kings. The usual sentence that follows the report of a king's death is **“As for the other event of \_\_\_\_\_'s reign, and all he did, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel?”**

After Baasha, three kings follow quickly in less than 3 years. The third king is Omri who reigns for about seven years, bringing stability to Israel after several years of uproar between rival factions. His dynasty lasts through two grandsons.

Omri is a powerful king and a man of great ability. From a secular historical standpoint, Omri's reign (876-869 BCE) is significant. We know from the Moabite Stone (discovered in 1868 and now in the Louvre Museum in Paris) which mentions both Omri and his son, Ahab, that Israel extended its influences over its neighboring states during his reign. He defeats Moab and makes it a vassal state and keeps the Arameans from his borders. He arranges a marriage between his son Ahab and Jezebel (the daughter of the king of Tyre), bringing peace and economic prosperity through trade between the neighbor nations. Even after his dynasty comes to an end, the Assyrians continue to refer to the Israelites as "the house of Omri". (Keck, et al., 1999).

Not only does Israel expand its political influence during Omri's reign and that of his son, Ahab, but its economy also flourishes. Omri buys land in Samaria on a high hill (ideally defensible) and moves the capital there. Archaeology has shown that the city begun by Omri and completed by Ahab had fortifications unequaled in ancient Palestine for excellence of workmanship. They strengthen the defenses of key cities with massive walls in Megiddo and Hazor as well as elaborate tunnels that sink down through the rock to the springs beneath these cities to assure them a supply of water in times of siege (all found and dated by archaeology). (Keck, et al., 1999)

However, Omri's secular successes are not interesting to the author of Kings who simply refers the reader to the archival materials for Omri's acts. The only achievement the writer notes is the establishment of Samaria as the capital of the northern Kingdom.

Otherwise, he dismisses Omri with the other kings who sin against the Lord and continue in the idolatrous ways of Jeroboam.

### **I Kings 16:25-27**

But Omri did evil in the eyes of the Lord and sinned more than all those before him. He followed completely the ways of Jeroboam son of Nebat, committing the same sin Jeroboam had caused Israel to commit, so that they aroused the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, by their worthless idols.

As for the other events of Omri's reign, what he did and the things he achieved, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel?

**What does this tell us about what is important to God? How are we tempted to view achievement over true discipleship?**

### **Ahab**

Before the text even describes the events of Ahab's reign, the author says that Ahab "did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him" (16:30)

Ahab is another king who is considered important and powerful by secular history but is not viewed in the same way by the author of Kings. (The author is more interested in how kings follow God than in how successful they are.) Ahab is mentioned in the Moabite stone. The "Monolith Inscription" of the Assyrian king Shalmanezzer III mentions Ahab as contributing a substantial force to the anti-Assyrian coalition at the Battle of



Qargar in 853 BC. He completes many of the projects begun by Omri. He has stables at Megiddo with stalls for 450 horses and reportedly has 2,000 chariots. According to I Kings 22:39 he has a palace inlaid with ivory, and archaeological digs have found ivory inlays that are believed to have been a part of this palace. (Bright, 1981).

### **Read I Kings 16:29- 33**

#### **Why is Ahab considered so evil?**

1. Perpetuates Jeroboam's idolatry
2. Marries Jezebel of Tyre (Baal worshiper)
3. Spreads Baal worship

#### **What comes to mind when you think of Jezebel?**

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Things we know about Jezebel at this point in I Kings:

- the daughter of Ittoba'al king of Tyre (Sidonian princess)
- brings her Baal and Asherah worship to Samaria
- So influential with Ahab that he builds a temple for Baal in Samaria, allowing Baalism to flourish under his reign. (Solomon did the same for his wives, and the ancient mind would have accepted this as the way things were.)

#### **Paganism at this time:**

The temptation to adopt the worship of the Canaanite gods of fertility alongside the worship of Yahweh and to bring pagan practices into Yahwehism had been around for a long time (evident in the passage we read in Deut. 12). Many Canaanites came into Israel during the time of David and Solomon; most were in the Northern state of Israel, so a state policy (brought in by Jezebel) that fostered the worship of Baal would have been received without shock and even welcomed by many. While Ahab remained a nominal Yahwist as the names of his sons Ahaziah (meaning “Yahweh has Grasped” or “Upheld of the Lord”) and Jehoram (“Exaltation of the Lord”) show, he allowed the court to be paganized and gave prophets of Baal and Asherah (a female fertility god) official status. (Bright, 1981)

Canaanite religions worshipped fertility gods, a form of paganism that included practices such as prostitution and child sacrifices. The head of the pantheon was the father-god, El. The chief active deity was Baal (Lord), a title of the ancient Semitic storm-god Hadad, who reigned as king of the gods on a mountain in the north. He was considered the god of rain which also made him the god of life, since rain brings life. An important Canaanite myth was the death and resurrection of Baal which corresponded to the annual death and resurrection of nature (winter and spring). Female deities included Asherah, Astarte and Anat who all represented the female principal in the fertility cult. They were often shown as sacred prostitutes, pregnant mothers, or bloodthirsty goddesses of war. (Bright, 1981)

It is safe to assume that while some native Israelites may have resisted the worship of Baal and Asherah and some became completely paganized, many probably worshiped Yahweh and the fertility gods. Polytheism was common at this time.

This is the scene that God sent Elijah into.

**Additional questions for thought:**

(These types of questions will come up through the study so if there will be more time later to explore these topics if you run out of time)

**What other gods are we tempted to follow besides God?** (Think outside the box - there are other religions but also habits of our culture or “cultural religions” such as the worship of money, fame, etc.)

**Can we be worship more than one god at once? Can we worship other gods while giving lip service to God?**

**Do we sometimes hold up as ideal people who say they honor God (ie: Ahab naming his sons with godly names) and are successful but who do not live out life in ways that show true discipleship to Jesus? If so, why is that a temptation for us? What repercussions does this have our children? For non-Christians?**

**Conclusion:**

In 1 and 2 Kings, God judges leaders not by popular measures of success but by their faithfulness to divine will. The stories in Kings make us think about history beyond

social, economic and political factors and look also to the issues of faith and obedience. Paganism was common at this time; the Israelites during this time often worshipped other gods, trusting them to bring them prosperity just as we often trust in things other than God to take care of us.

In 1 and 2 Kings, we see that God's will is being worked out in history. Even though humans seem to be doing all the acting, it is God who works behind the scenes to bring about events. God gives people their positions, and he takes them away. (Jeroboam is a good example of this). The same God who gives them a place in history also brings them down. However, people still have the choice to decide to follow God or not. It is an individual's own decision to follow and obey God or not that affects his/her future.