

Introduction to Kings

1 & 2 Kings were written as one book, and this introduction will treat them as such.

Historical Context

Who is the author?

The book is formally anonymous. No one claims to be the author, nor is there a primary character in the books who is the likely to be the author.¹ Given that the final events occur in Babylonia (2 Ki 25:27), it seems likely that the author was also in exile in Babylonia. Jewish tradition, as recorded in the Talmud, names Jeremiah as the author; other prominent exiles, such as Ezra and Ezekiel have been suggested. None of these can be confirmed.

Because the book was written so far after the actual events, the author would have required external sources. Three written sources are referenced in the book, Acts of Solomon (1 Ki 11:41), Chronicles of the Kings of Israel (1 Ki 14:19, et al), and Chronicles of the Kings of Judah (1 Ki 14:29, et al); the author may have used other sources as well.

Who are the recipients?

The recipients are most likely exilic Jews in Babylon.

When was the book written?

These books cover 400 years in the history of Israel, from Solomon's ascension (~970 BC) to Jehoiachin's release from a Babylonian prison (~560 BC). They do not, however, mention the return of the Jews from captivity in Babylon in ~538 BC. Thus 1 & 2 Kings were probably written around 550 BC.

What historical situation occasioned this writing?

The fall of the nation of Israel, both the southern and northern kingdoms, is the most likely impetus for the book. In the Hebrew Bible, Kings is the final book in the section known as the Former Prophets; the other books are Joshua, Judges,

¹ Unlike 1 & 2 Samuel.

and Samuel. Together these books trace the history of Israel from Joshua who conquered the land with them, to the judges that ruled and delivered them, to prophet Samuel who setup the monarchy for them, and to the kings who ruled them. Kings records how Israel lost the land that Joshua worked so hard to conquer.

What is the author's purpose?

The author wrote a history and thus described the events of the fall of the nation. But Kings doesn't merely record **what** happened; it also explains **why** it happened. The first "why" is Israel's covenant with God; there were conditions for keeping the land, and Israel had repeatedly violated these conditions. As a result, they were now facing the consequences of their actions, curses that had been specified in the covenant (Dt 27-28). The second "why" is the character of God. He is the only God, Creator and Ruler of heaven and earth; as such he demanded exclusive worship and obedience to his law. When Israel failed to obey, God promised to judge them. Even so God was compassionate, always looking for reasons to delay or mitigate his judgments.² The third "why" is the promises of God. He promised Canaan to Abraham's descendants, and he promised a dynasty to David. Despite Israel's sins, God always keeps his promises. The fourth "why" is the character of man. Kings testifies to the unbelief and disobedience of all people, even God's people.³ Kings shows "that the kings of Israel and Judah, almost without exception, were hopelessly flawed. The kings were not alone in this, of course; the people as a whole possessed a chronic tendency to sin."⁴

Four hundred years of history have been reduced to little more than 50,000 words; obviously the author of Kings was very selective in what he recorded. "What we have here is not a straightforward history but a history which contains its own theological commentary on events. The author's intention was not so much to record the events themselves as to explain their significance."⁵

² Provan, 11-13.

³ Walvoord, 1:485.

⁴ Carson, Introduction to 1 and 2 Kings.

⁵ Carson, Introduction to 1 and 2 Kings.

What genre of literature is this?

It is probably most accurate to call Kings prophetic narrative; that is, although Kings is historical and theological, it is prophetic themes that most permeate the books. Paul House lists five distinguishing characteristics of prophetic narrative:

“First, it assesses the past based on God’s covenant with Israel. Second, it predicts the future by noting how God has blessed or punished Israel in the past and by noting what promises God has made to individuals (e.g., David in 2 Sam 7:7–17) or to the nation as a whole. Third, it creates its plot by emphasizing events that fulfill a prophetic view of the past and future. Fourth, it assesses characters based on how they accelerate or retard the blessings or judgments God sends to Israel. Fifth, like the prophets did when they preached in Israel, prophetic narrative instructs its audience to turn to the Lord so they can receive blessing instead of punishment.”⁶

Primary Theme

The primary theme of Kings is the interweaving of actions and consequences with the sovereignty of God. Actions always bring consequences, as the promises and curses of Deuteronomy foretold. But God’s sovereign freedom allows him to exercise judgment when he wants as well as allowing him to show grace and mercy when he wants.

Outline

- The united kingdom (1 Ki 1-11)
- The divided kingdom (1 Ki 12- 2 Ki 17)
- The remaining kingdom (2 Ki 18-25)

⁶ House, 57.

Works Cited

Carson, D. A., *New Bible Commentary*, 4th ed, 1994.

House, Paul R., *1, 2 Kings*, The New American Commentary, electronic ed, 2001.

Provan, Iain W., *1 and 2 Kings*, The New International Biblical Commentary, 1995.

Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck, and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1985.