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J. Robinson
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THE FIRST BOOK OF KINGS

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WHAT THE BOOK IS ABOUT

The book of Kings, printed in our English Bible in two volumes which we call 1 Kings and 2 Kings, was originally one book. The division into two was made when the book was translated from the original Hebrew into Greek, probably for the very practical reason that the Greek translation was longer and took up more space than the Hebrew.

The whole book tells the story of the Hebrews from the beginning of Solomon's reign to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, when the story of the Hebrew people as an independent nation came to an end. 1 Kings takes the story from the accession of Solomon to the death of Ahab, king of Israel, about 850 B.C. The earlier part of the story of the Hebrews has already been told in the other books which precede Kings in the Bible. The story of the Hebrew tribes crossing the Jordan and settling in Palestine is told in the book of Joshua. Their struggle to survive and win a place for themselves among the other inhabitants of the country is told in Judges, and then follows in the two volumes of Samuel the account of the transformation of the twelve tribes into a kingdom, and of how the second king, David, by military prowess and clever diplomacy, established the Hebrews as the rulers of Palestine and overlords of most of the neighbouring peoples. This was the time when the power and influence of the Hebrews was at its zenith, and later generations of Hebrews always looked back on the reign of David as the most glorious period of their history.

Solomon, David's son, who followed him as king, was a

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disappointment. He set himself up in great splendour as an oriental monarch, but the consequences of this, such as his demand from his subjects for slave labour, alienated the loyalty of the great majority of them. After his death ten tribes withdrew their allegiance to his successor and set up a rival parallel kingdom. It is the story of Solomon's kingdom and the two kingdoms which sprang from it which the two volumes of the book of Kings recount. Solomon's successors continued to rule the southern part of the country from Jerusalem. They were known as kings of Judah. The new kingdom's territory occupied the central and northern part of the land. It was known as Israel or Ephraim.

The fact that the northern kingdom was called Israel can cause confusion since the name 'Israel' can mean more than one thing. It can, as here, refer to the northern kingdom. Also, during the time of David and Solomon the whole kingdom was at times referred to as Israel, or All Israel. Then, too, there is a third use. The Hebrews as the covenant people of God, a community created by God at the Red Sea crossing and living ever afterwards in conscious allegiance to him by obeying the law he had given to them, are also called Israel. The word Israel is used in Kings in each of these senses, and the reader needs to take note in what sense the word Israel is being used each time he meets it.

The capital city of the new state of Israel was at first Shechem and then Tirzah. Finally, one of its kings, Omri, built a new capital, Samaria. Israel was larger, richer and more powerful than Judah. At first there was hostility between the two states but this soon passed into uneasy friendship and, in the time of Omri, an alliance in which Israel was the dominant partner. Not that Israel could be dominant over much more than Judah. The two states were only a small part of the wider world of the Near East, and in the Near East great political changes were taking place. A great nation, Assyria, was increasing its power more and more, and, with its power, its ambitions. In the end it sought to control the whole of the

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Near East. In time Assyria declined but then Babylon took its place. The states in Palestine inevitably became involved in these ambitions. To understand the issues we need to know something more of the history of the Near East.

THE NEAR EASTERN BACKGROUND

Civilization had originally begun in the Near East in the Nile valley in Egypt, and in the land bounded by the Tigris and the Euphrates in Mesopotamia. From the earliest times there had been contact between these two centres, and between both and Asia Minor, along the line of the river systems and through Syria and Palestine. This area, a strip of territory fertile by reason of the regularity of its water supply, has been called because of its shape 'the Fertile Crescent'. Such contact was probably at first the friendly contact of trade, but soon became, as the value of the control of the wealthy trade routes was appreciated, the hostile contact of rival armies vying with each other for effective control of the area. Palestine was part of the Fertile Crescent, in many ways the most important part. The Sinai peninsula is the land bridge between Asia and Africa, between Egypt and Mesopotamia, but this land is desert. It is Egypt's natural barrier against any invasion from Asia. The nearest part of the Fertile Crescent to Egypt is Palestine, and this simple geographical fact gave Palestine a military significance out of all proportion to its size. It was, perhaps, the greatest single-factor determining its history in the whole of the Old Testament period. It was always in the interest of Egypt to control Palestine because then she was able to maintain a buffer state to absorb the force of any hostile advance from Mesopotamia. Moreover, control of Palestine was essential to Egypt if she was to have access to the forests of Lebanon which provided the timber for her ships.

Equally any expansionist Mesopotamian power, with its eye fixed on the rich granaries of Egypt, needed to be master of Palestine if it was to move successfully across the Sinai desert

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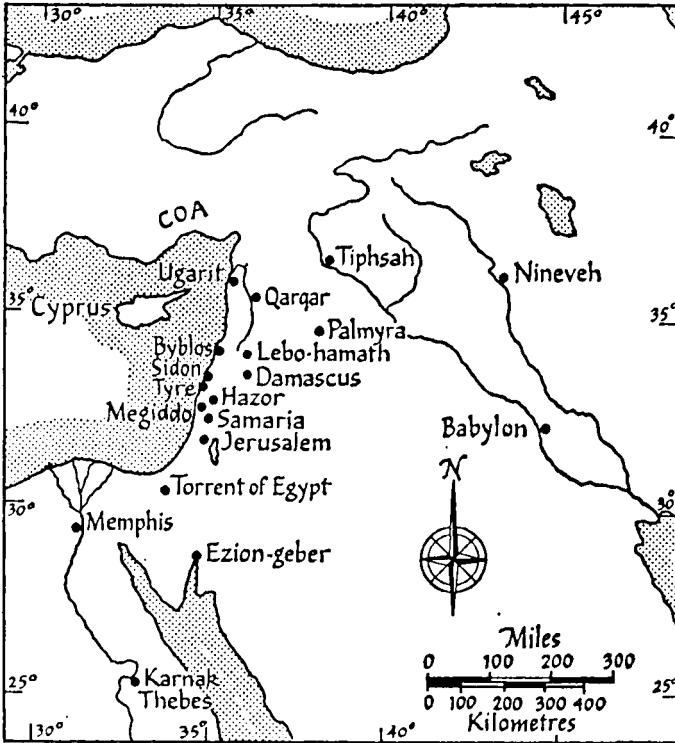
to attack the cities of the Nile valley. Palestine was, for almost the whole of the time during which the Hebrew tribes lived there, a cockpit in which the great powers of the Near East fought for the mastery. Its position was not unlike that of Belgium in nineteenth-century Europe. Palestine is small – it is not much larger than Wales – but it was never able to stand aside in splendid isolation from the quarrels of the great powers. It was drawn into their struggles and intrigues and used as a pawn in their military and diplomatic games.

In view of this situation, it may seem strange that the Hebrews ever had the opportunity to establish themselves so strongly in Palestine as to form kingdoms. This was possible because the Hebrews entered the land at one of those infrequent times when no great power was strong enough to exercise effective control beyond the range of its own territory. In the latter part of the thirteenth century, when it is generally assumed that the Hebrews settled in Palestine, Egypt, which was the titular overlord, was growing weaker and by the twelfth and eleventh centuries had become quite ineffective. The Hittite empire in Asia Minor was collapsing under the attacks of the new, vigorous Mesopotamian power, the Assyrians, but the Assyrians were not yet ready to exploit to the full the benefits of their victories. The vassal city states of Palestine were weak, divided and quarrelling among themselves, and the land was ripe for invasion. There were groups of pastoral peoples living in the desert on the edge of the settled country who were always ready to invade and pillage the richer settled country when they had the opportunity. If they were strong enough to do so, they remained permanently in those areas, either by driving out the inhabitants or by living alongside them and gradually, through intermarriage, fusing with them. In this particular time of weakness many semi-nomadic groups did move into the settled areas and among them were the Hebrews. They settled in the hill country of Palestine and, once established there, expanded throughout the whole country. This expansion brought them into contact with

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I. The Near East in the time covered by I Kings

another people who had also settled in a part of Palestine at the same time but from a completely different direction. These were the Philistines, a people whose place of origin is unknown. They came across the sea from somewhere in the Aegean area and settled on the southern part of the coastal plain of Palestine. They were joined by other groups who had tried unsuccessfully to settle in Egypt. They established some city states there, and also wished to expand and take control of Palestine. So the two peoples, the Hebrews and the Philistines, struggled

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with each other for control of the land without interference from the great powers. The story of this conflict is traced in some parts of 1 and 2 Samuel.

The greatness of David lay in the fact that he confined the Philistines to their cities on the coastal plain, and held control himself over Palestine and the trade routes. But this greatness was not to last. Solomon's hold was much weaker, if outwardly more splendid. After his death Palestine reverted, alongside the areas to the north ruled by the Aramaeans, to its earlier mode of existence as several small, rival, hostile kingdoms, each trying whenever and wherever possible, by war and diplomacy, to become more powerful than its neighbours. Israel and Judah, whose fortunes are the subject of the two books of Kings, were two of these states.

THE RISE OF ASSYRIA

The kingdoms were not left long to squabble and intrigue against each other. As soon as Assyria felt strong enough to expand, she began to turn her attention to the conquest of the states lying along the Fertile Crescent so as to be able to attack Egypt. The first such drive to the west came in the reign of the Assyrian emperor, Shalmaneser III, who reigned from 859 to 842 B.C. The small kingdoms realized their peril and joined together in a grand military alliance. Their combined forces met the Assyrian armies at Qarqar on the river Orontes in 853 B.C. Although Ahab, king of Israel at the time, contributed troops to this alliance, no mention is made of it in Kings. Our knowledge of the battle comes from Assyrian sources, which is all the stranger since the allies clearly gained the victory. In the Assyrian annals Shalmaneser characteristically claimed a great victory, but after the battle, he went home and did not move west again for five years. The first book of Kings ends with the death of King Ahab, but we need to know the outline of the story told in 2 Kings because it is necessary to understand how the whole of Kings came to be written.

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The Assyrians were defeated at Qarqar, but only for a time. After a century of relatively minor attacks, Assyria mounted a full-scale invasion under another great emperor, Tiglath-pileser III, and his successors, Shalmaneser V and Sargon II. This time the small kingdoms were picked off one by one, and were so jealous of each other that they do not seem to have had the capacity to see the threat which menaced them all, until it became the turn of each individual state to face the Assyrians. By then it was too late.

Israel's chief rival was the state of Aram with its capital at Damascus, the neighbour immediately to the north. Assyrian pressure on Aram led to a lightening of pressure from Aram on Israel's northern frontier and a consequent increase in prosperity for Israel – for a time. It did not last. Damascus fell to the Assyrians in 732 B.C. and then came Israel's turn. Samaria fell in 721 B.C. and the northern kingdom came to an end for ever. Judah was invaded in 701 B.C. but was not destroyed and continued to exist as a vassal of Assyria.

So involvement with the Assyrians led to the destruction of the kingdom of Israel, with the consequence that the Hebrew tradition, and especially its religious faith, was passed on to the future through Judah and Jerusalem. Some faithful Hebrews remained in the north but they had little influence. This fact has no small bearing on the form taken by the two volumes of the book of Kings, and the judgements expressed in them. They view the history of the Hebrews from the point of view of Judah, and from Judah at a time when she could rightly claim to be the only state which worshipped Yahweh as its God (see p. 18). The temple at Jerusalem alone maintained the true worship of Yahweh and guarded his teaching. Such a religious claim was easily mingled with nationalism to become the most powerful influence in Judah for the remaining years of its existence.

Assyrian power did not last long. A new rival power, Babylon, arose there to compete with Assyria for the mastery of Mesopotamia. After some years of struggle Assyria was

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Josiah's reform

defeated. Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, fell to the Babylonians in 612 B.C. and the Assyrian empire came to an end. In the years during which this struggle was taking place, the Assyrian hold on Palestine was weak. The king of Judah at the time, Josiah, saw himself as a second David who could once more bring all Palestine under the control of Jerusalem and her king. Josiah was a nationalist, a patriot, and a firm supporter of the temple at Jerusalem. The book of Kings depicts him as a devout follower of Yahweh the national God, doing what he did out of simple religious faith, but this view may well be the oversimplification of historians who were eager to transform the various greys of human experience into sharp blacks and whites. At all events Josiah used Assyrian weakness to extend his territory and act more independently than Assyria would wish for, or, when more powerful, allow.

JOSIAH'S REFORM

King Josiah carried out in 621 B.C. a great religious reform. He purified the worship of the temple at Jerusalem by removing religious objects and customs which had been taken over by the Hebrews from pagan neighbours. This reform had both political and religious meaning. As a religious act it declared that Yahweh, the god of the Hebrews, was so different from the gods of the surrounding nations that he could not be worshipped in the same manner. As a political act, it was a declaration of independence. Josiah's act was, in effect, an act of rebellion against the overlordship of Assyria. Clearly, both political and religious motives were involved in Josiah's reform. In Kings only the religious aspect is noticed; the political aspect is ignored. This is an oversimplification, but even so Josiah's action was, at least in part, a genuine religious reform and was supported as such by many of his subjects. It reflected the teaching of an influential group of theologians of the time whose distinctive ideas are expressed in the book of Deuteronomy. Because of this, Josiah's work has usually been

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called the deuteronomic reform. The deuteronomists, as these theologians are called, were concerned with much more than the purging of pagan influences from the temple. They had worked out a comprehensive theological system which is important for our purpose, because the book of Kings was compiled by an editor or editors who were theologians of that school. Jewish tradition has claimed that Jeremiah was the author of Kings, but this is no more than guesswork, and very unlikely guesswork at that. The book of Kings is the work of more than one author, and the man who settled its final shape is best described as an editor who took the writings of other men and assembled them together with his own editorial comments. It is impossible to say just how many men took part in the writing and editing of Kings. The one thing which links them all together is enthusiasm for deuteronomic theology. It seems best, therefore, to refer to them simply as deuteronomists.

THE DEUTERONOMISTS

The deuteronomists looked upon the Hebrews as being first and foremost the covenant people of Yahweh. For them the name Israel meant that first of all. The political states which the Hebrews developed, whether the united monarchy under David and Solomon, or the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah which succeeded, were only important to them as the political form which the covenant people had to accept in order to live in the conditions of those times. Israel was to them a holy nation, distinct from all other nations in that it lived by the law given to it by God. Because Israel was also a political entity living side by side with other nations, it was always in danger of growing like them and losing its own distinctive character. So to the deuteronomists, the neighbouring peoples, and especially the Canaanites – the people with whom the Hebrews came most into contact since they were already living in large areas of Palestine at the time that the Hebrews settled there – were a dangerous moral and spiritual influence. The only way in

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which Israel could be sure of being free of their influence was by living apart from them. So to the deuteronomists Israel could only be the covenant people of God as it resisted all influence from non-Israelite neighbours.

JOSIAH'S DEATH

Josiah's kingdom came to a violent end. For Josiah overreached himself and came to disaster. When the Assyrian empire was in its death throes, Pharaoh Necho of Egypt, fearful of the rising power of Babylon, sent an army along the Fertile Crescent to give support to the Assyrians. Josiah intervened. He ranged his army at the pass of Megiddo to prevent the Egyptians passing through. He was defeated and killed, and with him died the last hope of an independent Judah. His successors were mostly vassals of Babylon, but only rarely loyal ones. The Egyptians tried to hold off the Babylonians by fomenting disaffection and even open rebellion in Judah and other vassal states. They were only too successful, and finally Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian emperor, in 587 B.C. destroyed Jerusalem, brought the state of Judah to an end, and carried off the king and most of the nobility to Babylon as exiles.

This is the story which the book of Kings tells. The last incident narrated is the account of how Evil-merodach, king of Babylon, released Jehoiachin, the exiled and imprisoned king of Judah, in 562 B.C. and made him a pensioner of his court (2 Kings 25:27-30). We are not sure whether or not the book was compiled during this exile. Some scholars have suggested that it was compiled earlier and then, at a later time, extra narratives were added to bring the story up to date.

THE WRITING OF HISTORY

The point of such discussion is that all history writing reflects its own age and the outlook of the author or authors. This is not to say that historians set out deliberately to distort facts.