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## Why 1 and 2 Kings?

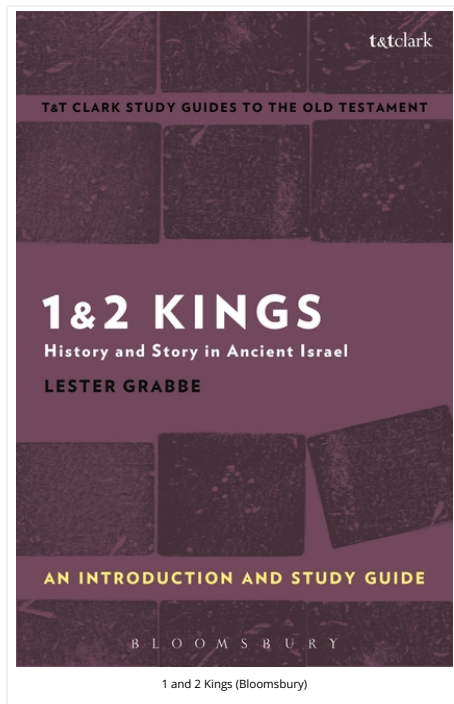
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By: Lester Grabbe

Why were the books of 1 and 2 Kings written? Some would affirm that they are meant to be a history of Israel in the time of the kings. Indeed, some even combine their information with that in 1 and 2 Chronicles, although the latter books are almost universally acknowledged to be centuries later. Yet the Hebrew Bible is not a history book; it is a book of religion. It contains teachings and lessons on how to live—or not, as the case may be—on ethics and morality, on the proper way to worship and serve God.

My Study Guide on [1 and 2 Kings](#) recognizes that there are many approaches to reading these books of the Bible. Nevertheless, it concentrates on the historical question. Why? The answer has to do with the way these and other books of the Hebrew Bible have been read over the centuries, but also to do with the question of the history of ancient Israel.



Interest in the history of Israel as one of the subjects of biblical studies faded during the later 1970s and 1980s, at a time of the popularity of readerly approaches to the Bible: reader response interpretation, feminist readings, post-modernist approaches. Many of the older historical disciplines, such as source criticism, ceased to be of interest to

many students in North America (though it is fair to say that these interests never faded in Europe).

With a renewal of concern for history in the 1990s, at least on the part of some, I founded and organized the European Seminar on Methodology in Israel's History for 17 years, from 1995 to 2012. We tended to structure our conferences around certain basic historical questions rather than specific sources, so there was no conference on the books of Kings at this time. Yet many of our discussions related to stories and data in these biblical books. Could the books of Kings be used to try to reconstruct the history of ancient Palestine? Many answered in the affirmative, as had always been the case, but others were adamant that as a secondary source the Bible could not be used to write history, that this was not history but apologetics.

Therefore, in my recent Study Guide I devote the central chapters to discussing the history allegedly contained in 1 and 2 Kings and attempt to provide a carefully researched and critically analyzed answer to the question, Can a history of Israel be written on the basis of the information found in Kings?

There are, no doubt, many historical problems. The backgrounds to many episodes in the history of Palestine are preserved in texts from Egypt and Mesopotamia. The hard-won data from multiple archaeological excavations and surveys in the Cis- and Transjordan was of fundamental importance. What do these show? One of the points I make is that historical reconstruction is not an exact science. There are many subjective elements in it. Therefore, my answer might not be the answer that someone else will give. Yet I do believe that one's position has to be argued for, and I believe that my position has considerable support from the data and evidence available.



Queen of Sheba, detail from Ethiopian fresco (c.1100s-1200s) From the rock churches of Lalibela, Ethiopia. Zagwe Dynast (Medieval POC - Tumblr)

1 Kings begins with the accession to the throne and the subsequent reign of Solomon. What does this story look like from a historical point of view? Much of the story looks like a magnificent Oriental legend. No Israelite king could be as powerful, wise, and imperial as Solomon, about whom the Queen of Sheba had heard things impossible to believe, only to find that his rule was even more splendid than the tales about it. Empires are acquired by conquest, but Solomon conquered nothing. His father David is supposed to have fought and defeated various peoples, but these excursions into Aramean Syria are doubted by many modern scholars. The allegation of David controlling all the land up to the Euphrates is also whistling in the wind. As for Jerusalem, archaeologists think it was perfectly adequate for a small emerging kingdom, taking in the central and Judean highlands.

Therefore, the first story in 1 Kings has many incredible elements. This did not incline me to reject the existence of Solomon as a historical person (as it did some), but it suggested that much of what we find in the Bible about Solomon is not history. Yet beginning already with the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam and his rival Jeroboam, we start to find references in the text to a "chronicle" (*Book of Days*) of the kings of Israel and Judah.

Like most royal courts, the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah no doubt maintained a record of events and the doings of the ruler. Judging from the chronicles found in Mesopotamia, these contained only a short summary of information, but the data cited from the "Chronicle" in the Bible are often brief: the name and length of reign of the king, the major achievements in war and building, perhaps a reference to something to do with the cult or religion. However, many of the statements about whether a king was righteous or wicked do not come from a chronicle, but were based on the judgment and conclusions of the writer of 1 and 2 Kings (who was probably a priest or other figure in the temple).

If we look at the reigns of most kings, the account of their reign in the Bible is usually dominated by statements regarding religion: whether the king was pious or not, whether

he allowed or suppressed the high places, the doings of major prophets, the pronouncements of "men of God", and the like. These are not usually the record of his reign that the ruler wished to have left behind but are religious concerns of the teller of the story. Often it is only a brief quote of the "Chronicle" that tells us of the normal royal achievements. Yet where kings of Israel and Judah appear in the records of other nations, primarily in Egypt and Mesopotamia, the names and the approximate dating usually agree with those in the text of 1 and 2 Kings. On the other hand, the actions of the king are often different. This may be because the biblical account focuses almost solely on the religious question but also because the biblical text evaluates things differently.

For example, Omri was considered a great king by the Assyrians, who for centuries referred to his kingdom as "the house of Omri." Yet the Bible devotes only twelve verses to Omri's reign. Likewise, the Assyrian inscriptions show Ahab as a strong king in a coalition with the Arameans and other smaller nations fighting against the Assyrians. Yet according to 1 Kings, Ahab was weak and was oppressed by the Arameans, while the Assyrians are not even mentioned with regard to his reign! What my Guide to 1 and 2 Kings attempts to do is go through the data of each king as given by the biblical text and evaluate it from the point of view of a modern historian.



Tel Dan stele with mention of the 'house of David' (Wikimedia Commons)



Jehu of the 'house of Omri' bowing before Shalmaneser III (Wikimedia Commons)

Yet in the final chapter other methods of interpreting the text are discussed. One does not have to read the text as history or ask questions of history. One can read the text as literature. After all, what is literature but stories, and the books of Kings are filled with stories. They can be investigated with all the tools of the literary critic. These stories are also examples of morality or provide implicit comments on ethics.

Whether or not the reign of a particular king is historical, it can still usually teach us religious lessons—information on how to be a better Jew or Christian or Muslim or other person of faith. In the end, many approaches to the books of 1 and 2 Kings are possible. For persons new to the Old Testament, these are some of the most interesting parts of the Jewish and Christian Bible.

**Lester L. Grabbe is Emeritus Professor of Hebrew Bible and Early Judaism at the University of Hull.**

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**Denis Mootz** · Education Officer at Macquarie University Museum of Ancient Cultures

I like the distinction between history and culture. Why do people need to "prove" the stories if they have faith?

Like · Reply · 1 · May 4, 2017 1:57pm



**Khaled Bizri**

Faith is not history!

Faith is a set of subjective and in some cases illogical foundation for thought and common sense.

To replace history with faith is not an iota different from putting on blinkers and waiting for someone to whip you ahead!

Like · Reply · May 25, 2017 8:05pm



**Korus Destroyus**

Hmm.. The Bible usually devotes a small passage to many 'large' events or rulers. It devotes half a verse to the destruction of Gath (Tell es-Safi), even though Gath was one of the most major sites in the region when it was destroyed. Perhaps this can be explained by reference to the certain narrative and perspective of the biblical writer, rather than a supposed inaccurate reconstruction/portrayal of the events of the time.

Like · Reply · 1 · May 4, 2017 6:03pm



**Bryant Jacob Williams III** · Northwest Baptist Seminary

I find it interesting that a false dichotomy is set up by those that view the Hebrew Bible, and by extension, the Bible, to be a religious text that is not historical. It is like trying to dismiss that implication that if the Bible is historical, then what is said about the God of the Bible is true and that we are accountable to what is written in it. Yes, the Bible is both religious and historical.

1 and 2 Kings were written using royal archives. This is made clear in the text as you also referred to as well. The emphasis is not on the history of the individuals involved, but on the reasoning, the "why" behind that history. Whether or not agreement as to the "why" behind the event in question is another issue entirely.

Like · Reply · 5 · May 4, 2017 6:06pm



**Khaled Bizri**

Either the Bible is a collection of tales or it is a robust historical account of the past!

Evidence clearly demonstrate that its historical narrative is flawed in mountains of issues.

That leaves being a collection of tales derived from the historical events - "historical novels," you might say - only on a persistent violent theme.

You can read your Bible the way you like, but propriety calls for the historians to deal with the Bible the way their discipline dictates.

Like · Reply · May 25, 2017 8:09pm



**Ofra Ben-Zvi Seroussi** · Tel Aviv University | אוניברסיטת תל-אביב

I like the explanation.

Like · Reply · 1 · May 5, 2017 8:14am



**Marek Roman Olszewski** · Filology of the Semitic languages and Exegesis of the Old Testament at Pontificio Istituto Biblico

Who believes in God is religious? He who does not believe in God - Any Absolute is Religious? Here is the problem with this article. The religious is every opinion regarding the personal relation with the Absolut, whoever is. Those who believe in some god, see in it a certain ethical system binding on men and on himself. This is a faith too. Anyone, who does not recognize any divinity, means, that he does not have faith? My answer is that even the atheist has a faith based on the choice of values whose origins are not the divinity, but the man himself, since the place of divinity occupies a m... [See More](#)

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