

# Old Testament #3: History Books, Part II

## I & II KINGS – THE CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

### GENERAL OVERVIEW

1. Jeremiah (or a contemporary) wrote Kings for the Jews during the time of the Babylonian captivity to explain the reasons for their exile. It begins with the accession of Solomon (971 BC) and ends with the deportation to Babylon (586) and release of Jehoiachin from prison during the captivity (562).
2. After the death of Solomon, his son Rehoboam’s bad judgment and tyrannic leadership split the kingdom in two. (I Kings 12:1-19). The divided monarchy consisted of Judah, the southern kingdom with its capital at Jerusalem, and Israel, the northern kingdom with its capital at Shechem.
3. Judah (Southern Kingdom) had nineteen kings (and one queen) over 350 years. Israel had twenty kings over a period of over 200 years.

Judah had occasional revivals, eight righteous kings (or, semi-righteous), and eleven unrighteous kings. Israel had no revivals and no righteous kings; eight of them either were killed or committed suicide.

In 722 BC, Assyria attacked Israel, deported the people, and resettled the land with its own people. In 605 and 597, Babylon attacked Judah, finally conquering Jerusalem in 586, and carrying away most of the people into captivity.

4. I and II Kings features five influential men.

Solomon	During his reign, Israel expanded to its greatest limits and became a world power. But his wisdom failed him in domestic affairs and he disobeyed the Lord’s commands. (I Kings 11:1-11)
Elijah	He was the most colorful OT prophet and the most referred to (29 times) in the NT. He is noted for stopping the rain for three years, challenging the prophets of Baal, and his translation to heaven.

Elisha	Elisha was a disciple of Elijah and trained by him for four and a half years. He is best known for the “double portion” he received and the many miracles he performed.
Hezekiah	His reign of twenty-nine years was a time of great national revival. However, he failed to disciple his own son Manasseh, who became one of the most abominable kings in Judah’s history.
Josiah	He came to the throne at eight years old and led the nation in covenant renewal and return to Yahweh. However, he was killed in a battle against the Egyptians after he refused to listen to God’s voice.

## **PURPOSE**

1. Kings was written to show the results of obedience and disobedience.

And to preserve a record of the kings of Israel and Judah.

## **I & II CHRONICLES**

### **BACKGROUND**

The traditional author is assumed to be Ezra. The last verses of Chronicles are repeated in the first verses of Ezra, indicating continuity between the writings. The two books also share many theological, historical, and linguistic similarities that imply the same person authored them.

Chronicles was written sometime in the fifth century BC, after the return from Babylon. If Ezra was the author, then it was written after he returned to Jerusalem in 458 BC.

1. Chronicles was written to the Jewish remnant who, after returning from Babylon, found the work of rebuilding slow and the obstacles numerous.

**Chronicles is a book of hope, written to urge the remnant to complete the work they had started.**

2. Although Chronicles covers the same period as Kings, the purpose is very different. Kings emphasizes the sins of the nation while Chronicles emphasizes the glory of the nation, especially the four

revivals under Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah.

The first revival was during Asa's kingship. (II Chronicles 15:8-12) Asa was the third king of Judah. He reigned 41 years. He put away the male prostitutes, removed idols from the holy places, broke down altars, and deposed the "queen mother" because of her idolatry. He sacrificed 700 oxen and 7,000 sheep and led his people into a national covenant to seek God. However, in his 36th year, when Baasha, the king of the Northern Kingdom, attacked him, he enlisted the aid of the Syrian king instead of trusting the Lord. When the prophet Hanani rebuked him for his compromise, he had the prophet thrown in jail. Three years later, Asa contracted a severe disease in his feet. He did not seek the Lord and he died.

The second revival was during Jehoshaphat's kingship. (II Chronicles 17:3-6) Jehoshaphat (reigned 873-848 BC) was Asa's son. In his early years, he sought God and removed the high places and the Asherah from Judah. When Moab and Ammon made war against him, he inquired of the Lord and proclaimed a fast for all of Judah. But in his later years, he married his son Jehoram to Jezebel's daughter, a decision that eventually led to the introduction of Baal worship in the Southern Kingdom.

The third revival was during Hezekiah's kingship. (II Chronicles 29:5-6) Hezekiah (reigned 715-686 BC) acceded to the throne at one of the lowest points in Judah's history. He immediately reopened and cleansed the Temple that his father Ahaz had left closed and desecrated. He then reorganized its liturgical and choral service. After a monumental Passover celebration, the people were moved to destroy all their idols. Unfortunately, Hezekiah did not raise his son Manasseh in the ways of the Lord, and so he became one of the most wicked kings in Judah's history. He sacrificed his sons in the fire, practiced witchcraft, and consulted mediums. He named his son Amon after the principal Egyptian deity.

The fourth revival was during Josiah's kingship. (II Chronicles 34:1-5) Josiah (reigned 640-609 BC) had no spiritual training at home (his father was Amon and his grandfather was Manasseh). Yet he began to seek the Lord when he was sixteen. He purged Judah of idolatry, destroyed the altars of Baal, and burned the bones of the false priests.

**Chronicles omits David’s conflict with Saul, his sin with Bathsheba, his problems with Absalom, the sins of Solomon, and almost the entire history of the Northern Kingdom.**

## **THEMES**

1. God is faithful to His covenant.

II Chronicles 36:22, 23

*In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, **in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah**, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing: “This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: ‘The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build a temple for Him at Jerusalem in Judah.’”*

2. The Temple is one of the most prominent themes in Chronicles. The Chronicler is concerned about the nature of true worship so that the people can experience the real presence of God.

**The continual emphasis on the temple, the priesthood, and worship are to remind the people of what they must do in order to remain in the land and to prosper.**

3. Israel has a unique destiny among the nations.

**Chronicles opens with the most extensive list of genealogies (nine chapters) in the entire Bible. The list starts with Adam and ends with the house of David. It is to remind the nation that all redemptive history leads to David and the promises God made to him.**

## **EZRA – THE FAITHFUL SCRIBE**

### **BACKGROUND**

1. Ezra led the second wave of exiles from Babylon. He also codified Israel’s laws, and most likely collected and edited the Old Testament canon.

Ezra 7:10

*For Ezra had devoted himself to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.*

Ezra first devoted himself to study God’s Word. That is phase one of discipleship: learning the Word of God. Then Ezra did what he learned. That is phase two of discipleship: obeying the Word of God. Finally, Ezra taught the Word. That is phase three of discipleship: teaching the Word of God.

This book was probably written sometime between Ezra’s return to Jerusalem in 458 BC and Nehemiah’s return in 444 BC. Ezra was written to the remnant of Jews who, after returning to their land from Babylonian captivity, found the work of re-building slow and the obstacles numerous.

2. In 539 BC, the Persian king Cyrus issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to their land. Zerubbabel led the first wave of approximately 50,000 Jews, and began to rebuild the temple.

Cyrus the Great was the king of Persia from 550-530 BC. Isaiah prophesied concerning him 150 years before his reign: “It is I who says of Cyrus, ‘He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desires.’ Thus says the Lord to Cyrus His anointed, whom I have taken by the right hand, to subdue nations before him, and to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: ‘I will give you the hidden wealth of secret places, in order that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. For the sake of Israel My chosen one, I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor though you have not known Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me.’” (Isaiah 44:28-45:6)

3. Opposition and difficulties delayed the completion of the temple until Haggai and Zechariah urged the people to finish what they started. The people responded and the temple was completed in 515 BC.
4. Fifty-seven years later Ezra led a small remnant from Babylon with the support of King Artaxerxes.

There is a gap of 57 years between chapter six and chapter seven.

Ezra was written to remind the people of God’s faithfulness and to encourage the nation to put away sin and walk in obedience.

Even though God was faithful to return the people to their land, they were unfaithful to Him and took foreign wives for themselves. Ezra interceded for the people “praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before God.” When the people heard, they wept bitterly, repented, and put away their foreign wives. (Ezra 10:1-3)

## **THEMES**

1. God is the sovereign Lord of history and will use pagan rulers (Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes) to accomplish His purpose.
2. Strong confident leadership is required to lead the people of God forward. (Ezra 5:2)

“Then Zerubbabel and Jeshua set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, helping them.” (Ezra 5:2)

## **NEHEMIAH – BUILDING AND BATTLING**

### **BACKGROUND**

Nehemiah wrote all the ‘first person’ sections of the book, but Ezra probably compiled and edited the finished work. It was probably written around 430-420.

1. Nehemiah was the trusted cupbearer to King Artaxerxes. When he heard a report of the state of Jerusalem, he petitioned the king to allow him to return and rebuild the city.

He served two terms as governor of the Judean province, executing political and religious reform. He rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem while battling the enemies of the Lord that tried to stop him.

2. Nehemiah records the last historical events of the Old Testament and provides the background for the ministry of Malachi. Ezra/Nehemiah set the stage for the New Testament.

## **THEMES**

1. Ezra/Nehemiah was written to remind the people of God's faithfulness, to restore the people to the land, and to encourage the remnant to put away impurity and walk in covenantal obedience.
2. Nehemiah exemplifies the power of one person to change a nation. It is the story of decisive leadership coupled with significant management skills. These are reflected in the rebuilding of the walls, a feat he completed in 52 days.

## **ESTHER – DIVINE PROVIDENCE**

### **BACKGROUND**

Tradition attributes this book to Esther or Mordecai. It was probably written shortly after the death of Xerxes (465 BC), in the reign of his son Artaxerxes I.

1. When Cyrus conquered Babylon he provided for the Jews to return to their land. However, the vast majority did not go.

The people disobeyed the prophetic warnings of Isaiah (Isaiah 48:20) and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 51:6) primarily because they had prospered significantly in Babylon.

The story takes place in the half-century interval between Ezra 6 and 7 during the reign of the Persian king Xerxes (486-465).<sup>1</sup>

There is no mention of God, the Law, or sacrifices and offerings in Esther. None of the New Testament authors ever quote from it and no copies of it were found with the Dead Sea scrolls. It is not a theological work but an entertaining historical narrative.

2. The book of Esther was written to encourage the Jews that God was sovereign in the nations and would protect His people – even though they were disobedient in not returning to their homeland.

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<sup>1</sup> Xerxes is called Ahasuerus in the text.

Esther also provides an explanation for the origin of Purim, one the Jews most festive holidays. The word ‘Purim’ means ‘lot’ and it refers to Haman casting lots to decide which day to destroy the Jews.

## THEMES

1. Esther presents a clear picture of God’s providence.

God’s providence is seen in: Vashti’s removal, Esther’s promotion, Xerxes’ restless night, Haman’s pride, and the miraculous deliverance of the Jews. This is not an accident but a deliberate narrative technique employed by the author. The message conveyed is “Even when God is not speaking, He is still working.”

### Esther 4:14

*“For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?”*

### R.K. Harrison

*“The book of Esther, then, serves the purpose of showing how Divine Providence overrules all things; even in a distant, far country, God’s people are yet in His hands.”<sup>2</sup>*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the major differences between Kings and Chronicles? How do they complement each other? Do the similarities create any confusion?
2. What was the major contribution that the prophet Ezra made? What miraculous milestone did God use Nehemiah to accomplish? What did you learn from these two and how does it change how you live?
3. God works behind the scenes in the Esther narrative. How have you seen evidence of God’s providence in your own life?

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<sup>2</sup> Introduction to the Old Testament, p. 1099.

## **HOMEWORK**

1. Read II Chronicles 15:8-12, II Chronicles 17:3-6, II Chronicles 29:5-6, and II Chronicles 34:1-5. What common factors do you see in these four passages describing the four revivals in the Southern Kingdom?