

United Kingdom - Introduction

Saul, David, and Solomon - The First Three Kings



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Summary

The first three kings of Israel brought the nation from the tumultuous period of the judges to a high-watermark of military and commercial greatness.

The period marks the end of the old era of anarchy (during the judges) and paved the way for the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

The First Three Kings

The lives of Israel's first three kings follow the same story-arc:

Two of them began life in humble circumstances, and at the beginning, all had humble hearts. They were small in their own eyes, and they were thoroughly impressed with the importance of the position to which God elevated them. But, after they had achieved the dignity of monarchy, their heads began to swell: and they all suffered a spiritual and moral fall. The consequences of this fall were felt, not only by themselves, but also by the kingdom at large.

Saul began life as a simple farm boy with not the faintest notion that he would ever sit on a throne. When appointed to the great position, he was modest to the point of embarrassment - and there were doubts about his leadership ability. He showed great zeal in rescuing Israel from their enemies. But he neglected to lead Israel in accordance with God's instructions - he failed to fit into his place in the Theocracy. He was rejected, and the rest of his reign was a mental and spiritual decline. The first king of Israel is one of the most tragic figures of the Bible.

David began life as a simple shepherd and worked in Saul's court and army before having to flee for his life from that king. He spent years in the wilderness - a leadership apprenticeship - before he became king. When he was king, he was extremely successful in his wars. This success led to his arrogance and his great moral failing. The consequences of his sins led to troubles in his family, and ultimately in Israel.

Solomon began life as David's son and heir, and though this was not the humble start that Saul and David had, Solomon had the same modest heart. Solomon was extremely successful in trade and building. At the height of his splendor, he too fell; he failed to lead Israel in God's paths and ended his reign by sowing seeds *that would destroy Israel's Theocracy.*

Israel's Last Great Judge

Israel had just been through the period of the judges.

During this period, Israel experienced a cycle of foreign oppression, deliverance (by a judge whom God chose), then, after the death of the judge, back to anarchy and foreign

oppression (see Judges 21:25). The breakdown of Israel's government coincided with the breakdown of Israel's spiritual relationship with God.

The cycle of oppression, liberation, and anarchy continued until the time of the last great judge, Samuel. Samuel was a prophet, priest, and judge. He led Israel to victory over their foreign oppressors, the Philistines. Samuel also led Israel to spiritual regeneration - the restoration of Israel's spiritual relationship with God was his life's work. In his old age, he was a renowned and venerable judge with an impeccable administration, a prophet whose word was sure to come to pass, and the representative of God to the nation. Samuel was, perhaps, Israel's greatest judge. But Samuel could not last forever: and, after his death, Israel's future was uncertain. In his old age, Samuel tried to retire and pass his position to his sons, sons who turned out to be the opposite of their father. The nation looked with apprehension on the death of their great judge and rule by contemptible successors.

The nation decided it was time for something new: it was time for a change. Israel demanded a king. When the tribes of Israel assembled before Samuel to ask a king, they were hoping that a monarch would unite the nation and bring them respectability in the eyes of their neighbors. They hoped that a king would free them from foreign oppressors and dangerous neighbors.

Israel equated monarchy with material prosperity; Samuel equated monarchy with a rebellion against God.

There was a problem: the problem of kingship in a theocracy. The ideal Theocracy is when a nation stays faithful to God, and he appoints the ruler that is most pleasing to him in every generation (as with the judges). Though God might choose the first monarch, successors would gain power by the hereditary principle - independent of divine appointment. In the future, as God could see, these kings would lead Israel astray. But Israel demanded a king, and God granted their wishes. He first warned them that their visions of monarchy did not include the side-effects of tyranny and servitude. But Israel demanded a king, and God chose one for them.

Footnotes

1. This is the pattern pointed out in Judges 2:11-19. See also Cambridge Commentary on Judges chapter 2, F.F. Bruce 'Israel and the Nations' pg. 19 - where Bruce argues that Israel's religious apostasy weakened them politically.
2. In 1 Samuel 12:2-5 at a national assembly, the nation attests to his integrity.
3. See F.F. Bruce 'Israel and the Nations' Page 23, where Bruce places Samuel alongside of Moses, Joshua, and David as one of Israel's 'greats.' In my opinion, his administration resulted in solid spiritual gains (breaking the cycle of the Judges); solid national gains (a national instead of regional judge); and more temporary, but still impressive, military gains. His work and character are greater than those of Barak, Gideon, Sampson, or any of the other Judges we know of.
4. 4. Editor Footnote: "Eli the priest had sons that turned out to be very evil. Eli raised Samuel from a

very young age. When Samuel was old he thought of turning his work over to his sons. They turned out to be evil people. Since Eli did not raise his sons well and He raised Samuel, is it possible that Eli not having skills to develop faithful children, that in his raising of Samuel that skill was not passed on to Samuel.”

5. Samuel’s sons were no good and their administration would likely bring on national decline and ultimately the anarchy preceding generations had experienced.

6. A king meant national greatness in their minds. It seems they felt inferior to the nations around them and thought a king would raise their national status. See Pulpit Commentary on 1 Samuel 8:4

7. See Bruce ‘Israel and the Nations’ pg. 24. See also Coffman on 1 Samuel 8 where he points out Israel’s folly in accepting the hereditary principle.

References

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James Burton Coffman, “Coffman Commentaries on the Old and New Testament”. Abilene Christian University Press, Abilene, Texas, USA. 1983-1999