

David's sin against Bathsheba and Uriah is missing from the CH (2 Sam 11:1–25). So what is there left to say? What takes the place of all the questionable or sinful actions we identified in our study of David?

In one word, *worship*. Though David was not allowed to build the LORD's temple because he was a man of too much bloodshed (1 Chr 22:8), David prepares everything for the day when his son will build the temple (1 Chr 16, 21:28–26:32, 28:1–29:19). Ironically, it is the DH that tells us about the "man after God's own heart" and then describes a sinful man, when we would expect the CH to make such a claim in the way the CH describes David.

SOLOMON: A LIFE AT THE EXTREMES (SAMPLE)		
Terrific, Wise, Faithful (with text reference)	Uncertain (with text reference)	Terrible, Foolish, Faithless (with text reference)
Solomon sets up officials of state far beyond anything before (4:1–6).		At the end of the list of offices is an official in charge of forced labor (4:6e).
Solomon continues to establish state operations with taxation districts to support the government (4:7–19).	He attempts to break up old tribal allegiances by redrawing boundaries for the taxation districts.	Look again: the taxation districts are almost, if not entirely in the north (see Figure 9.2 below).
Judah and Israel are as numerous as the sand by the sea—the promise to Abraham (4:20).		The nation is called "Judah and Israel." Is the kingdom already divided or is this a later vantage point (4:20, 25)?
The borders of the land are at their largest ever (4:21).		
The nation enjoys an era of peace and prosperity (4:22–25).		Solomon has an enormous number of stalls for horses, also fed by taxation districts (4:26–28).
The LORD gives Solomon enormous wisdom (knowledge) so that he is famous, a prolific composer of proverbs and songs, and people come from everywhere to hear him speak (4:29–34).		

Table 9.4. Solomon: Life at the Extremes (Sample)

2. Solomon

Charles Dickens described the reign of Solomon with uncanny insight in the opening words of the *Tale of Two Cities*:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.⁴

As we read the ten chapters devoted to Solomon (1 Kgs 2–11), we are apt to feel that everything is either this or that: terrific or terrible, wise or foolish, faithful or faithless, hopeful or hopeless. Solomon and the nation live at the extremes. There is also little doubt that the writer(s) intends for the reader to take into account the LORD's rules for the king in Deuteronomy 17:14–20, which Solomon tears through like a child opening presents on Christmas morning: horses—the more the better; wives—try seven hundred princesses and another three hundred concubines; wealth—so much that silver is worthless (see full discussion of the laws in Chapter Eight).

Our first order of business, consequently, is similar to our mapping of David's reign, with a few adjustments unique to the text before us (1 Kgs 1:28–11:43). We still need to read the text critically, watching for every terrific, wise, and faithful moment; and on the other side of the ledger, allowing ourselves to see all of the terrible, foolish, and faithless elements in Solomon's reign (see Table 9.4). It's hard to imagine much could fall between the extremes for Solomon, but for the sake of good class arguments, we will leave space in the middle. Once again, to illustrate the task, I will work through 1 Kings 4.

As you can see from my analysis of 1 Kings 4, despite an initial image in which everything looks great, sometimes the reader must be alert to clues the writer leaves. Readers need to look twice or even three times to make sure they are not missing warning signs. So, with this example and these warnings, please take the time to work through your assigned text before returning to my analysis (again, use Table 9.5 below, make copies, or sketch the columns in your own notes).

Solomon's story presents many of the same issues we dealt with in David's life; the apple did not fall far from the tree. That is to say, Solomon is much like his father, David. We should note, however, two significant differences between the two. First, whether good or bad, Solomon's activities reach to the extreme. Second, as readers, we do not have to deal with everyone singing Solomon's praises; no one is calling Solomon righteous, faithful, or a man after God's own heart. Instead, as we will see, by the end of his reign the LORD announces severe punishment for Solomon's failures.

⁴Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Andrew Sanders (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988; reprinted from the original, London: Chapman and Hall, 1859), 7.

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Table 9.5. Solomon: Life at the Extremes (Blank)

So what are some of the great things Solomon did? Without claiming an exhaustive list, here are a few things the writer(s) considers to be among his greatest accomplishments (most likely looking back, reminiscing on a golden age of Israel):

- At the beginning of his reign, Solomon prays for wisdom to lead the nation (2 Kgs 3:4–9); his wisdom is immediately illustrated in the case of the two women and the baby (3:16–29). Later, he becomes world famous for his knowledge (4:29–34), prompting a visit from the Queen of Sheba (10:1–13).
- Solomon radically increases the size of the state, its officers, and new taxation districts (4:1–19).
- Solomon builds a temple for the LORD, completed in seven years (5:1–6:38, 7:13–51). In his prayer of dedication,
 - Solomon recognizes that the LORD cannot possibly be confined to the temple he has built; he asks that the LORD's name be present at the temple and that God be attentive to their prayers (8:27–28).
 - Solomon also understands the missionary purpose of the temple, drawing people from all over the world to pray here and to learn about the LORD (8:41–44).
 - Solomon asks that the LORD pay attention to prayers offered toward the temple—now, and in the future when the people are in exile because of their sin (8:31–40). Solomon's prayer looks ahead to the Babylonian captivity and hopes for the day the people will turn their hearts back to the LORD (8:46–47). He prays for this day to come, and that when it does, the LORD will hear the prayers the exiles offer toward the temple, forgive them, and “do what is right for them” (8:48–53).
 - Solomon takes on numerous building projects, including his own palace, which was finished in thirteen years (7:1–12). He also rebuilds old cities and new cities (9:15–24).
- Because David fought wars to establish the kingdom, Solomon is able to be a merchant king who becomes enormously wealthy (10:14–25).

On the other side of the ledger, instead of compiling a list of failures or behaviors shorter than we might hope for, here we focus on the seeds of revolution Solomon planted that will eventually sprout into rebellion and the division of the nation:

- Solomon's building projects come at a high cost. While the text claims that he used slave labor from the native population still in the land (9:15–23), he also forced conscripted labor from all Israel: ten thousand a month in three shifts (5:11–14). The text later argues that the Israelites were not slaves, but held various other positions (5:15–22). These workers joined 70,000 laborers and 80,000 stonecutters of unclear origins.
- Solomon makes an arrangement with King Hiram of Tyre, in which Hiram will supply timber in exchange for the provision of food for his royal household (5:7–11); food was supplied to Solomon by his taxation districts (4:22–28). In other words, Solomon's magnificent

- buildings are paid for through the labor of his people and twelve taxation districts (located primarily among the northern tribes; see Figure 9.2).
- At the end of building the temple (seven years) and Solomon's palace (thirteen years), a payment dispute arises between Solomon and King Hiram of Tyre. Instead of payment in food, Solomon pays his bill by giving away twenty Israelite cities in the region of Galilee (another questionable loss to the north). When Hiram surveys the cities, however, he either rejects them or accepts them under the protest that they are not worth the sum owed (9:10–14). It appears that Solomon may have overspent or stretched his resources too thin.
 - To point out the obvious: Solomon has decimated the LORD's commandments from Deuteronomy 17:14–20. (1) In response to the limitation on horses (Deut 17:16), Solomon amasses chariots and horses: 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horses. The text even lists the excellent cost at which Solomon's traders could buy this military equipment, and how

he then exported them to other nations (1 Kgs 10:26, 28–29). We would describe such behavior today as brokering the sale of military weapons. (2) While the LORD did promise riches to Solomon—"There won't be a king like you as long as you live" (1 Kgs 3:13)—it is difficult to discern whether the extent of Solomon's wealth was what the LORD had in mind. In the middle of describing Solomon's business in military arms, the text includes an odd verse for the context: "In Jerusalem, the king made silver as common as stones and cedar as plentiful as sycamore trees that grow in the foothills" (1 Kgs 10:27). The placement of this verse with Solomon's direct violation of dealing in horses may suggest that the text is offering a critique of how far the wealth had gotten out of control. (3) After the report on military arms and the economy, we receive a staggering report on Solomon's efforts in diplomacy and sealing treaties by marrying women from royal families in other countries. Solomon has married seven hundred "royal wives" and three hundred "secondary wives" (concubines;

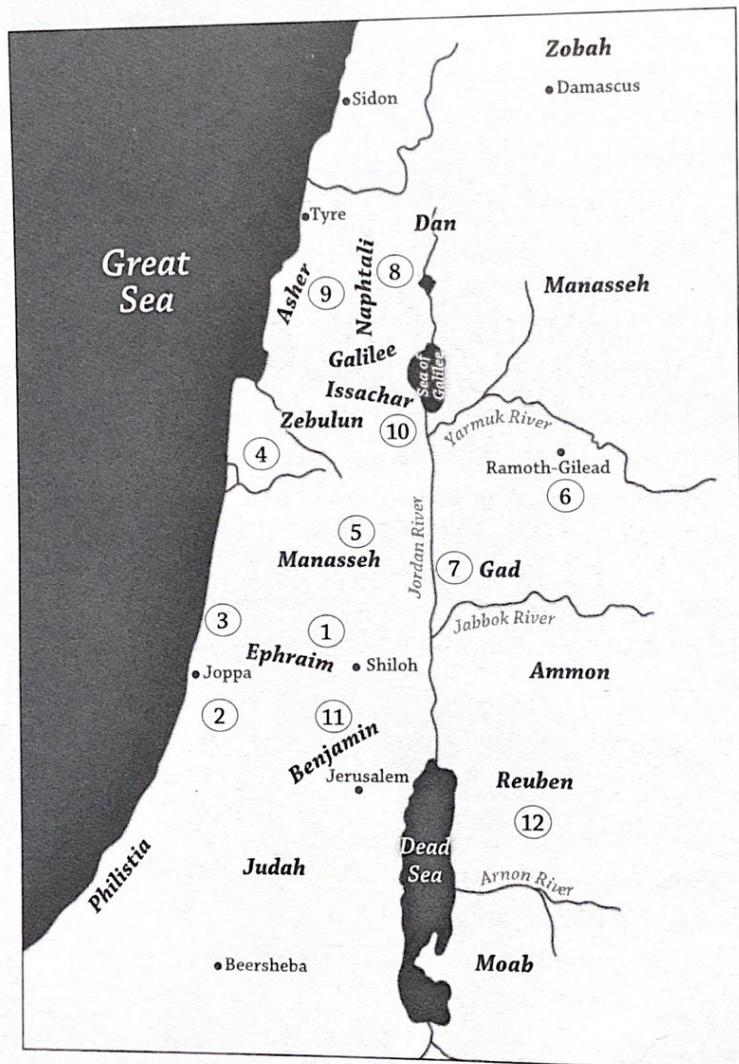


Figure 9.2. Solomon's Taxation Districts

11:1–3). These wives came with their gods, and just as warned, Solomon turned his worship to all of them (11:3–8).

We could point out other differences that are growing up between the north and south, including a more urban culture in the north, a different dialect of Hebrew (they speak “funny” Hebrew over there), different political ideologies (with the south much more committed to a single dynasty), and religious beliefs that already exist in the north (Baal worship) ready to step out into the mainstream.

As a result of Solomon’s practices, in part begun by his father David, the LORD announces the end of the united monarchy (1 Kgs 11:11–13). In honor of David, however, the LORD does make two concessions: (1) the LORD determines to hold off the division until after Solomon dies, and (2) the LORD will allow David’s family to keep one tribe, their own tribe of Judah—essentially, the southern half of the kingdom (1 Kgs 11:12–13).

3. Rehoboam

Because of his father and grandfather, Rehoboam inherits an explosive political situation after the death of his father. Unfortunately, he does not recognize the state of affairs for what they are; consequently, he is incapable of diffusing the bomb before it blows up in his face. He is no Abraham Lincoln. Rehoboam first misunderstands the nature of his meeting with “all Israel” (all of northern Israel’s leaders) at Shechem, a frequent site for important national meetings far inside the borders of northern Israel. He thinks the meeting is a mere formality to anoint him king, just as his father, Solomon, and grandfather, David, had been. Rehoboam does not realize that these leaders have come to dictate non-negotiable terms. They are clear in their stipulations:

Your father made our workload very hard for us. If you will lessen the demands your father made of us and lighten the heavy workload he demanded from us, then we will serve you. (1 Kgs 12:4)



Figure 9.3. The Division of Judah and Israel

When they put these conditions on the table, Rehoboam makes a second mistake of judgment: he believes he is in the position of power and need not *listen* (a key term in 1 Kgs 12) or *serve* (the other key term) the people he leads.

Rehoboam asks his father's (older) counselors what he should do. Their experience enables them to see the explosives just under the northern leaders' demands, so they advise him to be a servant to the people (12:7a), so they will be "your servants forever" (12:7b, emphasis mine)—an answer that requires Rehoboam to listen to the people and serve them rather than be served. But he has no desire or intention to listen to or serve anyone. For Rehoboam, the populace does the listening and serving—not the king. So Rehoboam turns to his friends for counsel more to his liking—young men who grew up with him "and now served him" (12:8b). They advise a bold power move: tell the people "my little finger is thicker than my father's entire waist!" (12:10b). Our English translations fail to capture the euphemism on a level equal to their crude, dismissive message. "My little finger" does not refer to Rehoboam's literal finger, but is a coarse reference to his penis. *That's how much more of a man I am than my father was!* If you think my father gave you a heavy work load and high taxes, "I'll make it heavier!" (12:11a). There'll be no more use of wimpy whips to punish you—as if whips are not harsh—I'll come at you with scorpions (12:11b). Northern Israel would just as well be back in Egypt, and that's the message Rehoboam chooses to send. He believes he can dictate the terms of this so-called negotiation.

"The king wouldn't listen" (1 Kgs 12:16), and when northern Israel saw that the king would not listen, they have their own message for Rehoboam:

Why should we care about David?
We have no stake in Jesse's son!
Go back to your homes, Israel!
You better look after your own house now, David! (12:16)

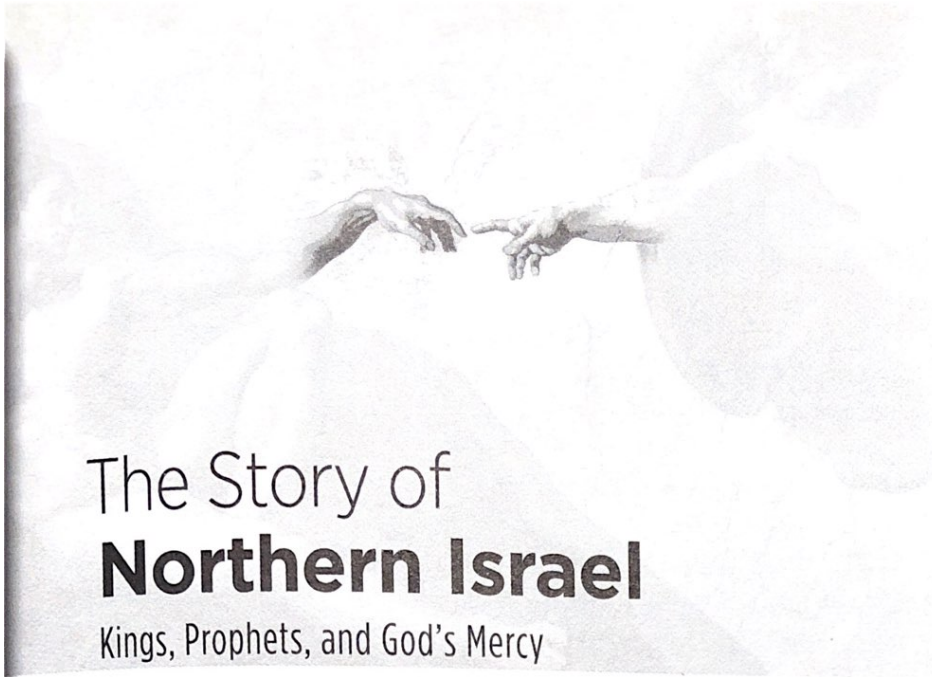
Or, in language a little closer to our own, they say:

Forget you!
We don't need you!
So get out of here,
and take your own problems with you!

And though the Israelites leave, Rehoboam still doesn't hear their message until he sends Adoram, his supervisor of forced labor, to the north and Israel stones him to death (12:18). *Now* Rehoboam understands, but it's too late. When Rehoboam comes back home ready to go to war against the north and bring them back in line, the LORD steps in and will not permit it (12:21–24).

Conclusion

The short time of the united kingdom is over. On one hand, given their differences and the weakness of the unity in the first place (recall that David fought three wars to keep the country together), we might be surprised that united Israel has lasted as long as it has. It's a wonder that the twelve northern taxation districts didn't rebel sooner. On the other hand, the nation of Israel was God's plan for reaching out to bless the rest of the world. God wanted the nation to be what it was called to be: "a kingdom of priests for me and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6). The LORD has tried to make this plan work. But the LORD will not stop the kingdom from collapsing under the combined weight of David, Solomon, and Rehoboam's failures—especially their failure to trust God: *now all the king's horses and all the king's men won't be able to put the kingdom together again.*



The Story of Northern Israel

Kings, Prophets, and God's Mercy

In this chapter, we will walk alongside northern Israel from her beginning with Jeroboam to her final days when the nation is scattered throughout the Assyrian empire. To make this journey with northern Israel means spending time in court—the court where God is the judge, the prosecuting attorney who demands justice, and defense attorney who appeals for compassion and mercy. I admit it is an unusual court, with the LORD playing enough roles to turn any mortal god into a schizophrenic. And while we know that Israel will be found guilty of the charges—failure to keep covenant and breaking God's heart by giving themselves to other gods (breaking the first commandment)—we do not know how the trial will conclude. Will God's mercy prevail and God forgive, or will God's justice carry the day and demand a punishment that fits the crime? Israel lives with a God who is deeply conflicted between mercy and justice—like any parent who loves their children (see Exod 34:6–7). So, even if Israel is handed over for punishment, if we will stay to patiently watch, we will see an amazing obsession: time after time, the LORD is unable to endure seeing his people suffer. So the LORD will pardon their sin and reduce their sentence to time already served.

Hosea, a prophet we will hear from later in this chapter, provides a compelling picture of God's inner struggle between judgment and compassion:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, Israel? . . .

10



READING ASSIGNMENTS

1 KINGS 12–14:20, 15:25–19:21, 21:1–29

2 KINGS 1:1–8:15, (9:1–10:36, 13:1–25), 15:8–31, 17:1–41

AMOS 1–9 AND/OR HOSEA 1–14

KEY TERMS

Asherah: the name of a goddess most often associated with Baal, represented by a wooden pole

Ephraim: a tribe that becomes so large its name is used as an alternate for Northern Israel

High Place: a place of worship in villages or in the country, most often for idols

Oracle: a short speech unit prophets use to convey the LORD's word to people

Samaria: the capital of northern Israel and an alternate name for the country

Synchronism: dating the beginning of one king's reign on the basis of another king's reign

Syncretism: merging the beliefs and worship practices of two or more gods

My heart winces within me;
 my compassion grows warm and tender.
 I won't act on the heat of my anger;
 I won't return to destroy Ephraim;
 for I am God and not a human being,
 the holy one in your midst;
 I won't come in harsh judgment. (Hos 11:8–9)

In a covenant lawsuit, God's final word is always grace.

So, this chapter will take the form of a trial or covenant lawsuit, like what we find in the prophetic literature (e.g., Isa 1; although I freely admit to taking great liberties with the form). We will begin with basic facts about the one charged (a mug shot, if you will), followed by the indictments (charges) and supporting evidence. At the end, I will ask you for your verdict and sentence.

Northern Israel: The Facts and Nothing but the Facts

Israel's case begins with basic data about the accused entered into the court's record: events, people, and dates. So far, we have not stressed or even mentioned more than one or two important dates. We will let these sail on by because, until David comes on the scene, we lack the evidence to be able to do little more than guess. Now, however, because of interaction with kings in Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt (who all kept good records), it becomes possible to assign dates to people and events in Israel with a fair degree of accuracy:

1. Most scholars in the field favor dating the exodus from Egypt in ca. 1290 BCE (1440 BCE is also considered; see "For Further Reading").
2. Most research also sets the division of the nation in ca. 922 BCE; thus, Jeroboam's reign and the independent nation of northern Israel begin at this time. Rehoboam most likely began his reign in Judah before 922 BCE. New kings often overlapped with the prior king while he is still alive—and both kings counted the same year(s) as part of their reign; one of many factors that make the precise chronology of Israel (and Judah) difficult to reconstructed (see "For Further Reading").
3. Working backward from the division of the nation, we date Solomon's reign from ca. 960–925 BCE (1 Kgs 11:42), David from ca. 1000–960 BCE (1 Kgs 2:10), and Saul from ca. 1040–1000 BCE (1 Sam 13:1).

KEY DATES (BCE)

The Exodus	1290
Saul	1040–1000
David	1000–960
Solomon	960–925
Division of the Nation	922
Assyrian conquest of Israel	722

Table 10.1. Key Dates for Northern Israel

4. Researchers and biblical texts refer to the northern nation by a number of different names: northern Israel, Israel, Ephraim (because this tribe was the largest group in the nation), and Samaria (because Samaria becomes the capital city).
5. The Assyrians conquered northern Israel in 722 BCE and scattered much of the population into Assyrian captivity, marking the end of northern Israel after two hundred years as an independent nation.

From the time the nation divides until the end of northern Israel (1 Kgs 20–2 Kgs 17), reading the biblical text is like watching a tennis match, with stories alternating between northern Israel (or just “Israel”) and southern Judah (or just “Judah”). Back and forth, forth and back (see Figure 10.1 below)—and so it goes, until the Assyrian Empire sweeps in and takes the game, set, match, and court from northern Israel.

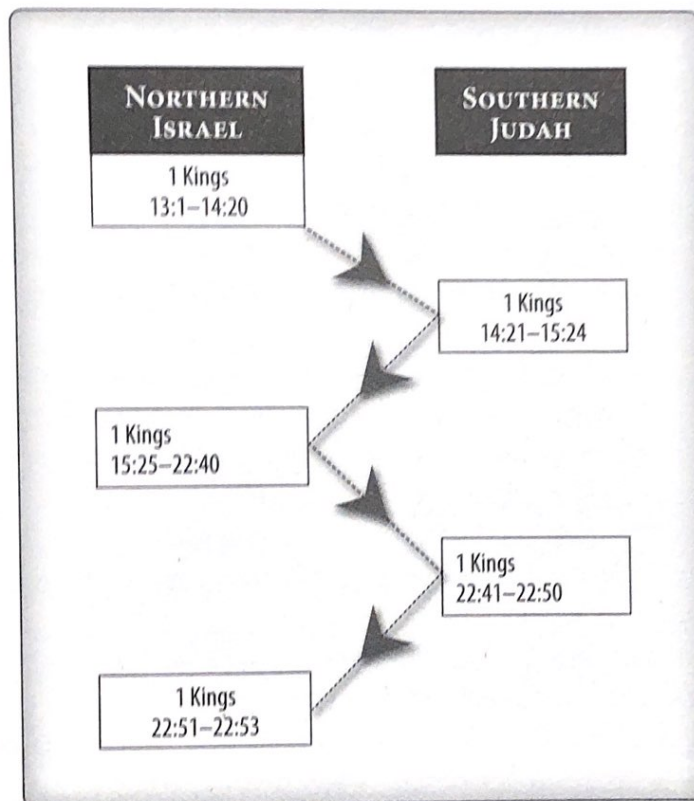


Figure 10.1. Mapping the Tangled Narrative of 1–2 Kings

But until this point, it can be difficult and frustrating for readers to keep up with the story line: what is happening, where is it happening, why is it happening, and especially, what does the writer(s) want us to notice? What is the point, the theological message or theme we are supposed to take in through all of the back and forth motion? To help with this problematic feature, here (and in Chapter Eleven) we will treat each nation individually, unraveling the strands of text that testify to events in each nation. I hope the literary purists will forgive me.

Indictment One: Political Turmoil Due To . . .

Israel is plagued by political turmoil, easily seen in the rapid rise and demise of one dynasty after another (with the exception of two dynasties, see Table 10.2). The charge is not the turmoil itself, but what causes the instability. Once we unravel the stories about Israel from those about Judah, the evidence reveals the problem behind the problem:

- Jeroboam establishes the nation and reigns for twenty-two years (1 Kgs 14:20); his son Nadab then reigns for only two years before he is assassinated by Baasha, who then attempts to set up his own dynasty (15:25–28).
- Baasha's dynasty fares no better than Jeroboam's. His son Elah reigns for two years before he is assassinated by Zimri (16:8–10).
- Zimri has a lengthy reign of seven whole days in Tirzah. In opposition to his self-declaration, the Israelite army made Omri king when they heard about the assassination of Elah (16:16). Then they came and laid siege to Tirzah, soon taking the city, prompting Zimri to commit suicide (16:8–10, 15–18).
- After Zimri's death, Omri must continue to fight and win a civil war to keep the crown (16:21–23). Once on the throne, however, Omri's dynasty becomes special on two counts: First, Omri builds and moves the capital city to Samaria (16:24). Second, Omri's dynasty lasts ca. forty-eight years (four generations) until Jehu, under God's direction, assassinates King Ahab and his family in a bloody massacre (2 Kgs 9–10), taking the throne (2 Kgs 9:6–7).
- After the purge of Ahab's family, the LORD rewards Jehu with a dynasty of four generations (after Jehu's reign). Thus, Jehu has the longest dynasty of any Israelite king (five total generations, ca. 102 years). Like others, however, his dynasty comes to an end with assassination (2 Kgs 15:8–10).
- Once Shallum assassinates Zechariah (the last king in Jehu's family), the nation becomes unstable again. Case in point, Shallum reigns for only one month before Menahem kills him (15:13–15).
- Menahem institutes a pro-Assyrian policy and pays off Tiglath-Pileser III in exchange for—well—not being destroyed (15:17–22). But when his son, Pekahiah, inherits the throne, he reigns only two years before Pekah (backed by an anti-Assyrian faction) assassinates him (15:23–26).
- Pekah stirs things up with Assyria, prompting the Assyrian King Tiglath-Pileser III to invade Israel and capture many towns. Before the Assyrian king gets to Samaria, Hoshea assassinates Pekah and becomes king (a move backed by a pro-Assyrian faction; 15:27–31).
- Hoshea comes to the throne in favor of paying off Assyria in order to save the nation; so, he pays tribute to Tiglath-Pileser III and the next Assyrian king, Shalmaneser V. But on the sly, Hoshea was working on a deal for Egyptian support in a rebellion against Assyria (2 Kgs 17:3–4).

THE MANY DYNASTIES OF NORTHERN ISRAEL				
Dynasty	Text	Generations	Total Years*	End of Dynasty
Jeroboam (I)	1 Kgs. 15:25–29	Two	24 Years	Assassination
Baasha	1 Kgs. 16:8–9	Two	26 Years	Assassination
Zimri	1 Kgs. 16:15–16	One	7 Days	Suicide
Omri	2 Kgs. 9:21–24	Four	48 years	Assassination
Jehu	2 Kgs. 15:8–10	Five	102 years	Assassination
Shallum	2 Kgs. 15:13–14	One	1 Month	Assassination
Menahem	2 Kgs. 15:23–25	Two	12 Years	Assassination
Pekah	2 Kgs. 15:30–31	One	20 Years	Assassination
Hoshea	2 Kgs. 17:1–4	One	9 Years	Captivity
			241 Years	

Table 10.2. The Many Dynasties of Israel

*Often a father and son overlapped, claiming the same years. Thus, the total of 241 years, though the nation only lasted from 922–722 BCE.

Exactly what happened is unclear, but eventually Hoshea thumbs his nose at Assyria and stops paying tribute. While at first it looks like he has gotten away with his rebellion, in fact, the Assyrian king is preoccupied with other issues. Once he is free to come to Samaria, he comes in force, tired of all the trouble Samaria keeps causing. So when the city falls to the Assyrians siege (2 Kgs 17:1–6), they exile the people to places throughout the Assyrian kingdom and repopulate the north with people from other places Assyria has conquered (the beginning of what will become the Samaritans). *And so northern Israel exits the stage of the Old Testament story.*

The first indictment against Israel, which lies behind and causes the political instability, is a perpetual lack of trust in the LORD. As a result of this lack of faith, one king after another takes matters into his own hands. As material evidence, we introduce the initial words and events surrounding Jeroboam's rise to power.

Jeroboam began his career as a state official in Solomon's government, quickly climbing the ladder of success. As a "strong and honorable" young man, Jeroboam soon came to Solomon's personal attention, and was promoted to supervise "all the work gang of Joseph's house" (1 Kgs 11:28)—a good news/bad news scenario, given how those in the north feel about Solomon's forced labor. I can imagine his text exchange with friends back home: *I got a great promotion! Wonderful! Congrats! What's the job? I'm in charge of the forced labor from the north! Traitor! Sell-out! @&\$@!* (and other words my editor would never permit).

Jeroboam might have been stoned to death alongside Adoram (12:18) if the direction of his life had not changed one day outside the city of Jerusalem, when he met the prophet Ahijah (11:29). Alone with Jeroboam, Ahijah took his own new robe, tore it into twelve pieces, and told

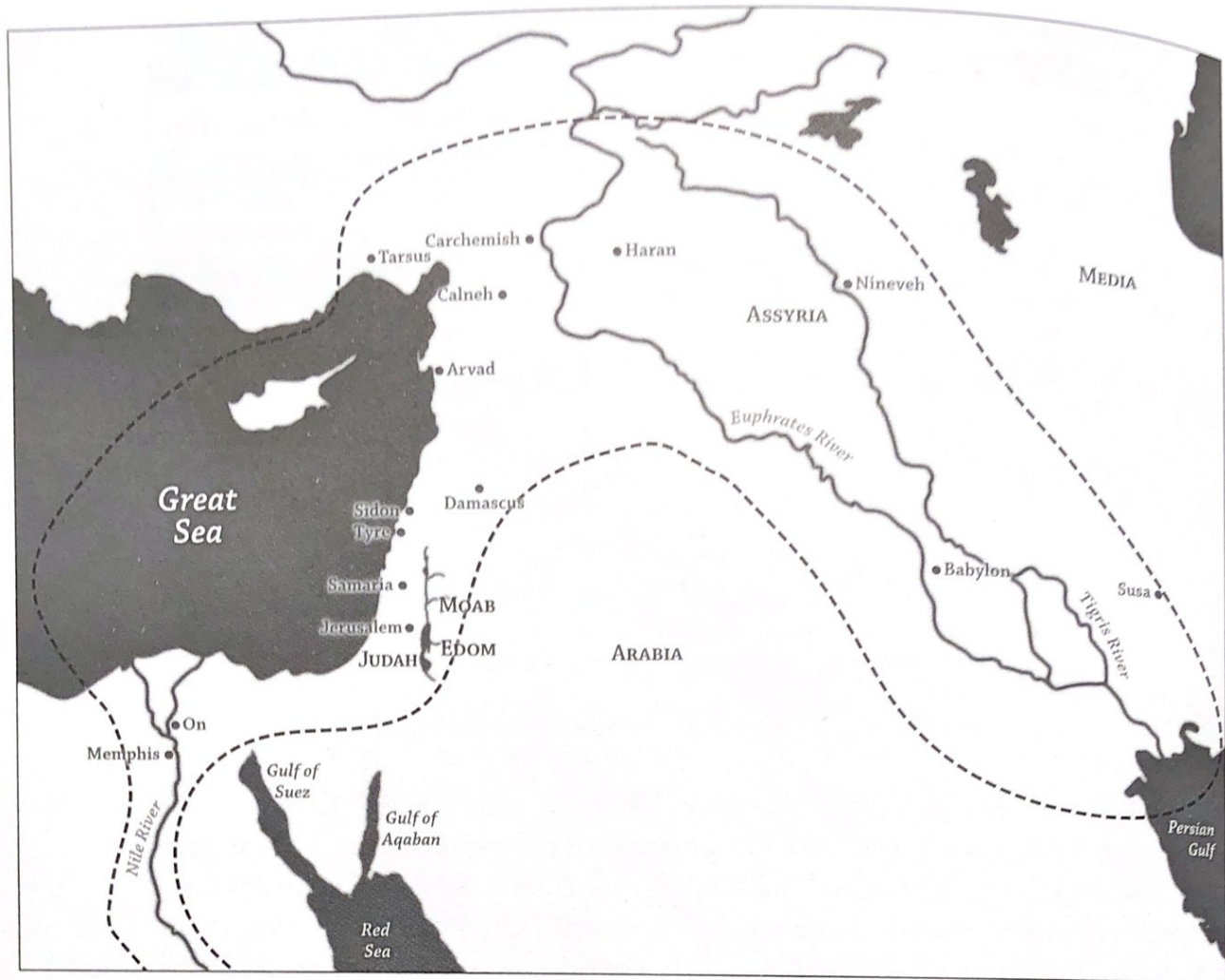


Figure 10.2. The Assyrian Empire

Jeroboam to take ten of the pieces (11:30–31a). Ahijah explained the object lesson: the LORD is taking the kingdom out of Solomon’s hands and giving ten pieces to you—Jeroboam. David’s family will keep only one tribe, because Solomon had turned the first commandment over and used it for scrap paper to take notes about new gods in the land to worship: Astarte (from Sidon), Chemosh (from Moab), and Milcom (from Ammon)—oddly, the most popular god, Baal, is left off the list (11:33). I suppose there is no use mentioning the obvious. The unused twelfth piece could represent Simeon, a tribe absorbed into Judah, or represent the Levites who lived in all the tribes without land of their own.

Ahijah tells Jeroboam: “You will be king of Israel” (11:37). The few conditions set on his reign and dynasty should come as no surprise (edited for emphasis):

IF

you will listen to all I command
 you will walk in my ways
 you will do what is right in my eyes (like David)

THEN

I will be with you
 I will build you a lasting dynasty (as I did for David)
 I will give you Israel

In other words, if Jeroboam will *trust the LORD* and the LORD alone, then the LORD will establish the nation of northern Israel and Jeroboam's dynasty (11:37–38; see again Deut 17:18–20). It is a strong promise with precise expectations; Jeroboam only needs to trust the LORD, instead of taking matters into his own hands (Genesis 3 all over again). If he will trust the LORD, the LORD will establish his kingdom and his dynasty.

But no sooner does Jeroboam become king than his fear overwhelms his trust in the LORD. He begins to think *the nation is in danger of going back to David's dynasty* (with Rehoboam), *especially if Jerusalem continues to be the religious center for his people* (12:26–27). To his credit, he realizes that religion is a powerful force, just as David recognized this power when he moved the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem in order to help unify the nation (2 Sam 6). After all, *the family that worships together stays together*. So, Jeroboam's fear will lead him to do the unthinkable, to which we will return shortly. For now, we have established that Jeroboam, at least, introduced "fear over faith" and "taking matters into one's own hands" into the political world of northern Israel. Such fear and self-reliance will lead to one assassination after another.

This was the cause for Jeroboam's dynasty ending so quickly (see 1 Kgs 11:38, 14:7–10); his fear of the situation overwhelmed his trust in the LORD so that he did what he thought had to be done to save the nation and his life (1 Kgs 12:25–33). And so it was for each king and dynasty in northern Israel, one after the other; fear and human effort to save the kingdom replaced trust in the LORD.

Indictment Two: Corrupt Spiritual Leadership

Beginning with Jeroboam, northern Israel is plagued by corrupt spiritual leadership that leads the nation to violate the heart of the covenant. Jeroboam's fear—for his nation, for his throne, and for his life—leads him to take each fear into his own hands and wage a systematic attack on the first commandment (12:27–28).

1. Jeroboam has two golden calves made. If we listen with a little imagination, we can hear what Jeroboam might be thinking or saying: *All those new changes that have come with David's temple? No more! Give me that old-time religion—like what we had at Mount Sinai* (Exod 32:1–6). *Moses got it all wrong, he misunderstood; for Aaron, the calf was just like the ark of the covenant; Yahweh rides the calf. After all, once Aaron saw the calf, he built an altar and declared in front of the calf, "Tomorrow will be a festival to the LORD!"* (Exod 32:5, emphasis mine). *We are still serving Yahweh, just in a form that predates Sinai, the ark, and all these things Solomon and David have started in the Jerusalem temple. We are restoring true worship.* And it helps that what Jeroboam proposes fits with the other prominent god in his land: Baal.

Obviously, the biblical writer disagrees with Jeroboam's actions and sees them as nothing less than a flagrant violation of the first two commandments. But just in case we miss the author's

position on what Jeroboam is doing, the writer finally comes out and says, "This act was sinful" (12:30). But for Jeroboam, we can be certain he was hard at work, persuading the people to accept his moves as he brought the two calves out for worship.

2. Jeroboam expresses great concern for the welfare of his people having to travel so far to worship—all the way to Jerusalem. We keep listening and reading with our imaginations open to what Jeroboam might have said: *Jerusalem is too far, so for your convenience and safety, one calf with its shrine will be in Dan (in the far north) and the other in Bethel (the far south)*. Jeroboam has sanctuaries or shrines built in two locations—to serve you. (Without a doubt McDonald's and Starbucks got their idea for franchising and multiple locations from Jeroboam.)

3. Shrines require a staff—priests to attend to the people and their sacrifices and to serve other needs before God. But instead of the social stratification and hierarchy in the south (here goes the imagination again) where only Levites are allowed to be priests, here in the north, Jeroboam is an equal opportunity employer. *Anyone can be a priest who feels called to be a priest* (12:31). Perhaps a religion degree was required—more likely not. The less these priests know the better.

4. And finally, the calves, shrines, and priests mean nothing if the people keep going to Jerusalem for the big annual celebrations. *We need festivals, holy days that will rival anything happening in Jerusalem so our people will party here, worship here, spend their money here, and most of all, stay here instead of going there*. So Jeroboam establishes a festival that occurs about one month after the Feast of Tabernacles in the south (1 Kgs 8:2), perhaps delayed to fit a later harvest time in the north than the south. So he has another selling point—a more convenient worship time.

Without a doubt, Jeroboam's public relations spin machine went into overdrive to convince his people of the legitimacy of his actions; and given what we know of these people and human nature, it probably wasn't all that hard to win them over. Jeroboam succeeds. First, he leads the people to worship at Dan and Bethel, or one of the local "high places" where shrines were built for Baal (2 Kgs 17:9). Second, with all these efforts, Jeroboam also succeeds in becoming the king to which every subsequent king in northern Israel is compared. The only question is whether any king will be as bad as, or worse than Jeroboam. Thus, the typical introductory formula for Israelite kings includes:

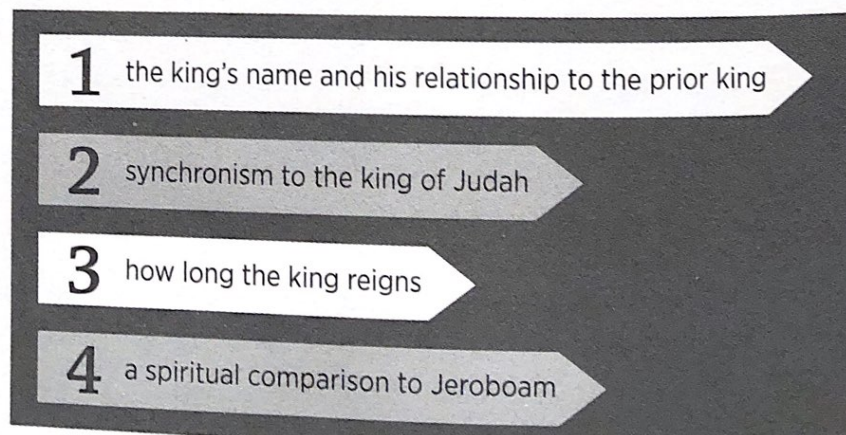


Figure 10.3. The Introductory Formula for Israelite Kings

The first three items in the introductory formula vary widely (item 1 will lack relationship to the former king in instances of assassination). But in every case, the spiritual comparison to Jeroboam centers on first commandment issues—the sin Jeroboam caused Israel to commit. Let's take Jeroboam's son as an example (1 Kgs 15:25–26):

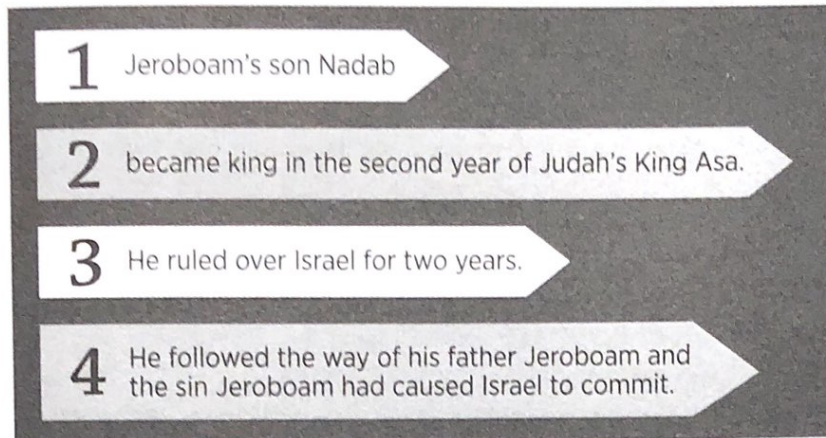


Figure 10.4. The Introductory Formula for King Nadab

Or, take another example from the next-to-last king of Israel, ca. two hundred years later (2 Kgs 15:27–28):

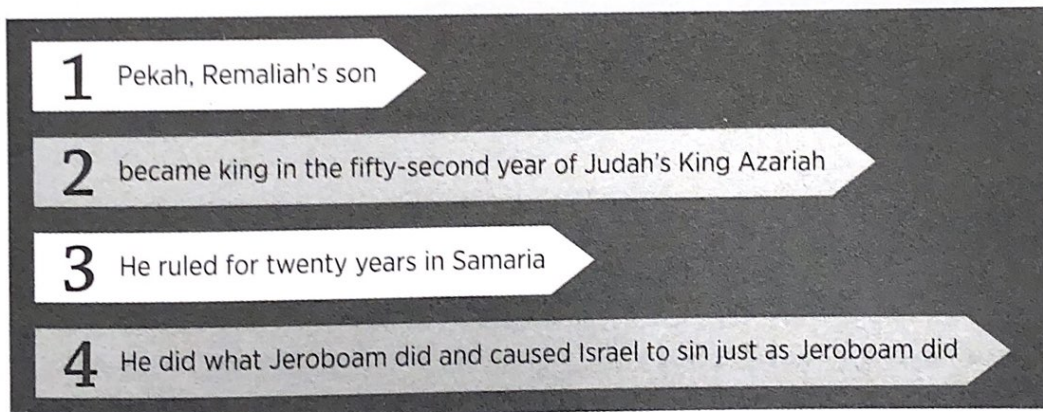


Figure 10.5. The Introductory Formula for King Pekah

And so the evaluations go, every king in Israel follows Jeroboam's spiritual lead and worships other gods. What happens among the people, however, is more difficult to uncover, simply because the DH keeps its focus on royal households and state history. So the best that we can do is look for glimpses among the people.

One such glimpse comes from the story of Elijah versus the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18–19). At least some, or perhaps many, Israelites are present that day because Elijah speaks to them.

Elijah approached all the people and said, "How long will you hobble back and forth between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow God. If Baal is God, follow Baal." The people gave no answer. (1 Kgs 18:21; see also 18:36–37)

Working backward from this circumstantial evidence, the people appear to have fallen to syncretism. They claim belief in the LORD as God, but they also believe in and worship Baal (among other gods). So Elijah asks the LORD to help the people to see that there is only one God for Israel and it is the LORD, not Baal. The people think the safe approach is to accept all the gods and their claims. But the LORD requires a single-minded allegiance—in marriage terms: monogamy. The LORD will not tolerate being one of many gods.

Additional evidence regarding the people comes from the writer's summary statement in 2 Kings 17 about why the LORD handed Israel over to the Assyrians (17:7–12, edited for emphasis):

- The Israelites sinned against the LORD their God.
- They worshipped other gods.
- They followed the practices of the nations.
- [They followed] the practices that the Israelite kings had done.
- The Israelites secretly did things against the LORD.
- They built shrines.
- They set up sacred pillars and sacred poles.
- At every shrine, they burned incense.
- They did evil things.
- They worshipped images.

What's in a Name?

Often, a name provides evidence regarding the god/God a person serves. For example, some names carry suffixes with special meaning, as in the suffixes "iah" or "jah"—a short form of God's name *Yahweh* (*Yah*). Thus, when suffixed to other words in names such as Ahijah, Elijah, Josiah, Hezekiah, Amaziah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and others, these names stake a claim to some relationship with *Yahweh*. On the other hand, the suffixes "bal," "bel," or "baal" refer to Baal, as in the suffixes we see in the names Ishbaal, Ethbaal, and even Jezebel. Finally, sometimes a writer will communicate what they think by changing the suffix of a name. For example, Saul's son is named Ishbaal ("man of Baal" in 1 Chron 8:33, 9:39), but called Ishbosheth in the DH (2 Sam 2:8, 12; 3:6, 8, 11; the suffix "bosheth" means "shame"). Thus, the "man of Baal" is insulted as a "man of shame." In a creative move, the writer has just said what he thinks of Saul's son and Baal. The same change occurs with Jonathan's son Merib-baal (1 Chron 8:34), called Mephibosheth in the DH (2 Sam 4:4). Small features and slight changes will reward an attentive reader with insight otherwise passed over.

The evidence is overwhelming: the people not only follow their kings to worship Baal, but also follow the practices of the people left in the land. They demolish the heart of the covenant—their promise to worship and serve the LORD alone.

Indictment Three: Refusal to Listen to the LORD's Prophets

While northern Israel was racing to Sheol (the grave) faster than a Jaguar XJ220 V12 four-wheel drive production sports car can get you from your dorm room to the nearest library (okay, to your favorite pizza joint), the LORD did not just sit on the sidewalk hoping the people would learn from what was happening and turn it all around. Instead, the LORD sent one prophet after another in the hope that the people might listen and respond. They didn't. They wouldn't. God was proactive—he did all he could, while still respecting their dignity of free choice, but Israel refused to listen (2 Kgs 17:13–15).

To say the LORD sent prophets to northern Israel, however, is to tap into widespread misunderstandings in our own culture about what a biblical prophet was or did in ancient Israel and, to complicate the issue even more, not all prophets in Israel were alike. The Hebrew term *nabi*—"prophet"—is elastic, stretching in one direction to reach groups of people living together who are prone to ecstatic behavior. Saul experienced this form of "prophecy" on his way home from his first, private anointing with Samuel:

When Saul and the boy got to Gibeah, there was a group of prophets coming to meet him. God's spirit came over Saul, and he was caught up in a prophetic frenzy right along with them. (1 Sam 10:10)

Saul has the same experience again in Ramah when he attempts to capture David (1 Sam 19:18–24). At the other end of the spectrum, the word "prophet" may refer to a man or woman who receives messages from God and conveys these messages to a particular person or group (see Exod 7:1–2). Some prophets are embedded in the king's court (e.g., Nathan, 2 Sam 12:1–15), while others work freely among the people. The first prophet we explore in northern Israel works with both the king and the people. He is a spokesperson for God and a prophet who can work miracles to support his message (another type of prophet on the spectrum).

Another common misunderstanding about prophets is that once they make a statement on behalf of God, Israel's fate is sealed (or whatever they have said is unchangeable). In fact, the prophetic word worked in the opposite way: to encourage a change before punishment comes or to encourage faithfulness so that God's Word develops as promised. The prophet Jeremiah put it this way:

At any time I may announce that I will dig up, pull down, and destroy a nation or kingdom; but if that nation I warned turns from its evil, then I'll relent and not carry out the harm I intended for it. At the same time, I may announce that I will build and plant a nation or kingdom; but if that nation displeases me and disobeys me, then I'll relent and not carry out the good I intended for it. (Jer 18:7–10)

Prophetic oracles are not God's final word. God hopes that the threat of destruction will get a nation or person to listen and respond, just as God hopes the promise of blessing will motivate a nation or person to remain faithful. The LORD's promise through a prophet does not obligate the LORD to keep the promise if the people turn against him. So the LORD sent prophets to northern Israel with great hope that their work would bring Israel back to him.

First Prophet: Elijah

Elijah will enter the picture just as northern Israel and her king are falling head over heels for Baal. The new king, Ahab, promotes Baal more than any king before or after him. He marries Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal (1 Kgs 16:31), builds a temple and new altar for Baal (16:32), and makes a sacred pole for Asherah (16:33). In fact, Ahab did more to infuriate the LORD, "the God of Israel, than any of Israel's kings who preceded him" (16:33, my emphasis). So, Elijah comes on stage just long enough to say that Israel's true God is going to turn off Israel's water supply for the next three years 17:1). The punch is directed straight to Baal's mouth. Baal can either put his

power where his mouth is and override the LORD's declaration, or be shown up as a second-rate nothing (see *Welcome to Baal's Country*, pp. 140).

Sure enough, Israel goes into a dangerous drought and, despite other stories within the story (17:2–18:4), our interests skip ahead to the conflict between Elijah, Ahab, and the question of who is God of northern Israel: Baal or the LORD (*Yahweh*)? For three years, the LORD's drought has been making a fool of Baal and anyone foolish enough to follow Baal (18:1–2). Now the time has come for Elijah to emerge from hiding and finish the fight.

Elijah proposes a contest to settle the matter: gather the people of Israel to Mount Carmel, deep within Baal's land (see Figure 10.6), along with the prophets of Baal and prophets of Asherah (18:19–20). When the people arrive, Elijah challenges them: "How long will you hobble back and forth between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow God. If Baal is God, follow Baal" (18:21). The Israelites



Figure 10.6. Northern Israel

are trying to serve Baal and Yahweh, which Elijah says is not serving Yahweh at all. *Decide*. Follow one or the other, but quit pretending it is possible to serve both.

Elijah sets the rules of the contest to favor Baal: two bulls, each prepared as a sacrifice, but no fire: “The god who answers with fire—that’s the real God!” (18:24). Deep inside Israelite territory, Elijah also gives the prophets of Baal home court advantage to go first. This, of course, should be an easy task for the god of thunderstorms and lightning. Baal’s prophets accept the challenge, prepare their altar and sacrifice, and begin to call on Baal in the morning and continue into mid afternoon. They sing, shout, and dance around the altar, but “there was no sound or answer” (18:26).

Around noon, Elijah starts talking smack. He is confident that the LORD will win and Baal is no more than a make-believe friend. So Elijah starts providing excuses for why Baal is not doing anything:

Shout louder! Certainly he is a god!

Perhaps he is lost in thought

or wandering

or traveling somewhere.

Or maybe he is asleep and must wake up! (18:27, my format and emphasis)

The translation glides over the sharp edge to Elijah’s sarcastic tone. He is not trying to be nice, but derogatory. For example, the term “wandering” may be a euphemism for a bowel movement. In our time we might say, “Maybe Baal is on his throne—*doing his business!*”

Elijah’s words only cause Baal’s prophets to intensify their efforts; they shout with a louder voice and cut themselves so that blood is all over them (18:28). But “still there was no sound or answer, no response whatsoever” (18:29). Their hysteria is met by a profound silence.

Elijah decides it is his turn as he calls the people closer to watch; he prepares an altar of twelve stones, digs a trench around the altar, lays out the wood, butchers the bull, and puts the bull on the wood. He then instructs people to fill four jars with water and pour them all over the altar, the sacrifice, even the wood—*water? In a drought?* Elijah orders four more jars full of water, and then orders it one more time—three times, until everything is soaked and the trench is full of water. *This had better work; look at all that water wasted!* Elijah comes close so the people can hear, and then prays:

LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant. I have done all these things at your instructions. Answer me, LORD! Answer me *so that this people will know that you, LORD, are the real God* and that you can change their hearts. (18:36–37, emphasis mine)

Without another word—no shouting, no dancing, no cutting—“the LORD’s fire fell; it consumed the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, and the dust. It even licked up the water in the trench!” (18:38). Lightning—not from Baal, from Yahweh—vaporized everything. And the people fell to

the ground in worship, shouting, “The LORD is the real God! The LORD is the real God!” (18:39). Baal’s prophets go down with their god, a bloody scene I could do without—but this is not my culture or place to judge (18:40).

Elijah’s story is not over. As soon as matters are settled on Mount Carmel, he sees rain coming and urges Ahab to hurry back home before he is caught in the storm. The events at Mount Carmel have broken the drought (18:41–46). But the next day, Elijah must run for his life—away from an enraged Queen Jezebel (19:1–3). Oh how he runs—eventually, all the way to Mount Horeb—a weary, tired, burned out prophet who feels very much alone (19:4–10). As much as he and we might hope, Mount Carmel didn’t change anything.

Second Prophet: Elisha

Elisha is the God-selected heir of Elijah’s ministry to northern Israel (1 Kgs 19:16, see also 2 Kgs 2:1–12), and yet, Elisha is a very different type of prophet than his predecessor. Elisha rarely speaks on behalf of God; instead, he is a miracle worker. In the narrative about his ministry in 2 Kings 2:13–9:13, I count no less than twelve miraculous events (most of them in 2:3–7:20); not to mention the dead man who is tossed into Elisha’s grave and immediately comes out alive (13:20–21). To help guide your reading and class discussion of 1 Kings 2–7, Table 10.3 below (copy or sketch in your own notes) allows you to compile your own record of Elisha’s miracles, including any moral, message, or lesson you might discern from the story (or not).

Everyone will have his or her own favorite Elisha story. One story that most have or will put on their list is the story of Elisha, the young men, and “da Bears” (2 Kgs 2:23–24). The story is compact, only two verses, with every detail of significance. First, notice where the prophet of the LORD is going and what we know about this place. Bethel is not just any town, but the southern sanctuary for Baal worship in Israel. As we reflect on this information, there can be only one reason Elisha is going up to Bethel—and it is not to pay his respects to Baal and offer a sacrifice. Second, the ones who come out of the city to meet Elisha on the road are not “little kids” (MSG), nor are they young people (CEB), but most likely “a gang of young men” (LB) or a “group of boys” (NLB). Third, they ridicule the LORD’s prophet by calling him “Baldy” and, more significant, tell him to go away: “Get going, Baldy! Get going, Baldy!” or “Go away, baldhead! Go away, baldhead!” (NRSV). These young men don’t want the LORD’s prophet in or anywhere near Bethel. The fourth detail, “they came out of the city,” makes me wonder if someone has sent them to drive away the prophet.

Elisha’s response is “to curse them in the LORD’s name” (2:24a), then it is the LORD’s decision to send two bears out of the woods to “mangle” forty-two of the youths—perhaps all, or perhaps only a few of a much larger group (2:24b). And yet, they accomplish their purpose. Instead of going into Bethel, Elisha goes to Mount Carmel (2:25).

ELISHA: THE MIGHTY MIRACLE WORKER		
Text	Description of the Miracle	Purpose? Moral or Lesson?
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		
11.		
12.		

Table 10.3. Elisha: The Mighty Miracle Worker

The big issue for our reading about Elisha's ministry is the purpose of all his miracles. What were the people to learn as a result of Elisha's wild and crazy actions? What are we to learn as readers? Too often we think every story in the Bible must carry its own specific moral or lesson. But if we try this approach with Elisha, we end up with bizarre lessons: never make fun of bald men (2:23–25), men should never cook (4:38–41, *well—perhaps not a bad idea*), or we should never borrow a tool (6:1–7). Other Elisha miracle stories defy any lesson or moral to the story—a strong clue that we are reading in the wrong direction. The miracle stories do not fit into a lesson-for-the-day. So what is their purpose?

At Elijah's contest on Mount Carmel, Elijah prayed that God would make it known that the LORD is God in Israel "and that I am your servant" (1 Kgs 18:36). Here, the presence of the LORD's

prophet equals or signifies the presence of the LORD in the land. This same idea is hinted at in the stories in 2 Kings 1:1–16 and 3:11–12, and made explicit in 2 Kings 5, the story of Naaman. To begin, Elisha hears that the Israelite king has torn his clothes in grief because the king of Aram has sent Naaman to Israel to be healed; the Israelite king thinks, “I am not a god” (meaning, I am unable to heal Naaman). This request may be a pretext for war because no one or god in Israel can heal Naaman (2 Kgs 5:6–7); but Elisha sends word to the king: “Why did you rip your clothes? Let the man come to me. Then he’ll know that there’s a prophet in Israel” (5:8). It is fascinating that Elisha says he will know there is “*a prophet in Israel*” instead of saying “*a God in Israel*,” which I would expect. But for Elisha, *if there is a prophet who heals, then there must be a mighty God*. In fact, this is precisely what Naaman learns: “Now I know for certain that there’s no God anywhere on earth except in Israel” (5:15). Elisha’s miracles are not about a moral or lesson; instead, the miracles demonstrate the presence of a mighty God in Israel: the LORD. *As long as the LORD’s prophet is in Israel—so is the LORD*. Elisha’s ministry is testimony to the presence of the LORD. The LORD has not given up on Israel; he has not walked out. A powerful and faithful God is still in and with northern Israel—if only they will see.

A Brief Recess: In addition to the narrative records of Elijah and Elisha, we are ready to enter evidence from the prophetic books of Amos and Hosea. These short texts are part of the Book of the Twelve in the Hebrew Bible, and assigned to the Minor Prophets in Protestant Bibles. The prophetic books contain tricky testimony, however, because on cross-examination, it becomes relatively clear that while these prophets were active during the life of northern Israel, their oracles were not written down until some time later. When these oracles were formed into books, additional material (some about South Judah) was included. Of course, it is possible the prophet said these words too, but it is more likely that others added them (e.g., editors or the prophet’s disciples). Nonetheless, with due care, it is possible to hear the messages God sent to northern Israel.

Third Prophet: Amos

Amos is an unusual prophet for at least two reasons: (1) Amos is not a professional, full-time prophet. Instead, he is a man of the land: he tends sheep and grows sycamore trees (Amos 7:14). (2) Amos is not from northern Israel, but South Judah—the village of Tekoa, south of Bethlehem. So when a priest of Bethel tells Amos he is not wanted there and should go back home (7:10–13), Amos tells him it was never his idea to come proclaim the LORD’s word to the north in the first place. God took him from his day job and sent him north to preach (7:14–17).

Based on the opening words of the book (1:1), Amos comes to the north during a peaceful and prosperous time—at least for the few who are living at the expense of the many. Amos is overwhelmed by what he sees: the wealthy mistreating the poor to enrich themselves (2:6–8; 4:1; 5:11–12; 8:4, 6). It is difficult to imagine how anyone could justify getting rich at the expense and suffering of other people—unless they believe they are entitled to wealth because they are God’s chosen people. And based on Amos’s words, that’s exactly what they think. *We are chosen and*