

A HISTORY OF DIVISION

The Israelites kings, *Deuteronomy 17:14-20*

The Bible introduces the Jewish monarchy through a story of rebellion, giving the impression the Israelite kings were a begrudging concession to a sinful request. Even though a story of mutiny introduces the kings, they occupy an important and prominent role in the Bible's narrative – they serve as a kind of bridge between humanity's fall from its role as rulers of God's creation to Jesus, the messianic king through whom God will restore humanity to its position. This lesson continues our slow movement through the major blocks of the Bible's story of humankind by considering the Israelite kings, the role God intended them to fill, and the reality of their legacy.

"A king to judge us like all the nations"¹

- Nations in the ancient near eastern world of the Old Testament commonly believed a nation's chief god served as its king (*cf. Exodus 15:18; Deuteronomy 33:1-5; 1 Samuel 8:7*).
- Even though they believed their god(s) ruled, those nations had kings who they considered divinely appointed, semi-divine figures who exercised a sacred responsibility to govern.
- Israel lived in that context and shared overlapping understandings about their kings. For example:
 - God instituted Israel's monarchy and expected its kings to represent Him by devoting themselves to the study of His law (*Deuteronomy 17:14-20*).
 - Because God appointed Israel's kings, actions against them represented actions against Him (*cf. 1 Samuel 24:1-6; 26:6-11*).
 - However, Israel's kings were not considered semi-divine nor better than other Israelites (*Deuteronomy 17:18-20*).
- God's expectation that the Israelite kings represent Him embodied a kind of return to Genesis chapter one and humankind's role as God's image-bearers.
 - God created humanity to be His image-bearers, to reflect His will and identity in their rule over the world (*Genesis 1:26-28*). Humankind, however, quickly abandoned that task to represent their self-interests (*Genes 3-11*).
 - Following its compacted account of humanity's failure, the Bible introduces figures who seemed to recapture humanity's purpose but who ultimately failed.
 - **Noah** – a righteous man (*Genesis 5:29; 6:9*) whose story ends in failure (*Genesis 9:18-19*).
 - **Abraham** – a man called by God and who covenanted with God (*Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1ff*) but who repeatedly fell short of God's expectations.
 - **Moses** – a man introduced as a new Noah (*Exodus 2:1-3*) and who reflected God's glory (*Exodus 24:1-18; 34:29-35*) but who also failed (*Numbers 20:2-13*).

¹ 1 Samuel 8:5. All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.



- Israel's kings, who God appointed to embody His rule, represented the hope of a break in humanity's rebellion and a return to God's intentions for humanity.
- Israel's kings, however, followed the pattern of failure already established in the Bible's narrative. Consider, for example, some of their most praiseworthy kings:
 - **David** – a man after God's own heart (*1 Samuel 13:14; 16:1-13*), a man with whom God made a covenant (*2 Samuel 7*), yet a man who suffered profound failures (*2 Samuel 11-12*).
 - **Hezekiah** – a king righteous like David (*2 Kings 18:3*) who also failed like David (*2 Kings 20:12-19*).
 - **Josiah** – a king described as being more righteous than David (*2 Kings 22:2; 1 Kings 15:5*), but who nevertheless also failed (*2 Chronicles 35:20-25*).
- God's plan for Israel's kings centered on their relationship to His word (*Deuteronomy 17:18-19*). Their failure to heed God's Word led God to appoint prophets to deliver His word to them.
 - Consider, for example, how much of the content of 1, 2 Kings revolve around the interactions of the kings and prophets – *27 of the 47 chapters feature God's prophets*.
 - The numerous chapters featuring prophets narrate the (often) tense relationship between the kings and the prophets because the prophets announced judgment against the kings for their failure to obey God (*cf. 2 Kings 17:13*).
- The kings' failure led to God's prophet-delivered announcements of a future ruler who would faithfully represent Him and through whom God would resolve humanity's rebellion problem (*cf. Isaiah 52:3-53:12*).

Applications

- God expects us to devote ourselves to His word like He expected Israel's kings to devote themselves to it.
- Like Israel's kings, we tend to listen to voices other than God's voice; we tend to follow our own perceptions rather than His instructions.
- God did not abandon His people because of their failure, nor did He scrap His plan for kings due to the kings' disobedience. His commitment to them offers us hope in our relationship with Him.
- God remained committed to Israel and its kings despite their failures because He promised to use them to bring Jesus into the world. God's Jesus-centered plan reminds us of His commitment to us – love motivates God's plan and His purposes triumph over our rebellion.
- But we must be clear – if we commit ourselves to rebellion rather than God as did some of Israel's kings, we exclude ourselves from God's good purposes.

The story of Israel's kings narrates humanity's struggle to live up to the image-bearing role God gave to it. The story of the Jewish kings also points us to the hope embedded in God's king-centered plan to save us from our failure. Let's therefore learn from the story of the kings; let's submit ourselves to God's will and learn how to faithfully represent His will and identity.

