

We three kings

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A. Introduction

1. Moses is dead; so is Joshua. The judges have done their best, but after some 400 years the Hebrew people still have only a tenuous hold on the land of promise.
2. The book of Judges ends with the people of Israel living in barely controlled anarchy, vulnerable to their enemies, compromised in their faith, and uncertain as to their future. Greece, Egypt, Assyria and Babylon are weak, nonetheless, God's people face a formidable foe.

B. The Philistines (c.1175 – 732 BC)

1. The Philistines, or Sea Peoples, were originally war-like settlers from the islands of the Aegean, migrating especially via Cyprus and Crete to settle in the Gaza Strip. This was part of a general middle eastern upheaval around 1200 BC and the Greek heroic age that included the collapse of the Hittite empire, the fall of Troy (1185 BC) and an invasion of Egypt (1175 BC). The Philistines, once settled, built five fortress cities on the south-west coastal plain – Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron and Gath.
2. Conflict was inevitable and the Philistines who were experts with iron defeated Israel in the disastrous battle of Aphek. The Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant and the shrine at Shiloh was destroyed. The aged priest, Eli, and his corrupt sons all died (1 Samuel 4). Eli's daughter-in-law, dying in childbirth, called her son Ichabod – the glory has departed.
3. The ark proved lethal to the Philistines. Their god, Dagon, fell from his pedestal and the people were afflicted with tumours. They returned the Ark to the Israelites, together with an offering of gold, in the hope of appeasing Yahweh. It was received back by the men of Beth Shemesh who foolishly looked into the Ark, with the result that many thousands died. The Ark remained at Kirjath Jearim as an object of terror for twenty years. God might exist but you didn't go near him!

C. Samuel (c.1105 – 1015 BC)

1. Samuel was the last judge of Israel and also the priest who replaced Eli. Dedicated to the Lord as a child, he was truly open to the voice of God and was a towering charismatic figure throughout his life. He called the people to repentance and, as a consequence, they defeated the Philistines at the battle of Mizpah. Samuel erected the Ebenezer Stone (Hitherto has the Lord helped us) as a memorial (1 Samuel 7).
2. Sadly, Samuel's sons did not share his piety and when he appointed them to the judiciary, the elders of Israel, alarmed by their corruption, demanded a king like the surrounding nations (1 Samuel 8:5). Reluctantly, he agreed, but warned them that a king would be a mixed blessing. He would conscript them into his armies, raise a ten percent tax on their

earnings, and commandeer them to his service. Such is the price of rejecting God as their king (1 Samuel 8:6-22). But that was what the people chose.

3. The people's rebellion during the period of the judges made God seem distant. Seeing only his judgements, they lost the sense of his love. Such a distant, unpitying God who will no longer intervene for our benefit leaves us in the position known as Deism, in which we decide that we will simply have to take matters into our own hands, whatever the price. This is what made the Israelites demand a king.
4. The record of the kings is covered by the books of 1 & 2 Samuel (mostly written by Samuel), 1 & 2 Kings (probably written by Jeremiah), 1 & 2 Chronicles (probably written by Ezra) Samuel and Kings give us a prophetic and moral evaluation of the kings, while Chronicles gives us a worship and spiritual evaluation focussing especially on Judah.

D. Saul the prodigal king (reigned 1073 – 1011 BC)

1. Israel's first king was externally everything the people thought a king should be – head and shoulders above the rest. His internal stature, however, proved to be far less admirable.
2. Samuel anointed Saul and in a short while he was confirmed by the people to be their king. In spite of the unbelief involved in this, God was still prepared to bless and to care for his people (1 Samuel 12:20-25). For a while, this appeared to be a good state of affairs – but soon Samuel's warnings began to come to pass.
3. We may command only as we keep the commandments (see Matthew 8:9). After some early successes against the Philistines, largely at the hand of his son, Jonathan, Saul disobeyed God.
 - a. He overrated his powers and made an illegal offering by acting as a priest king (1 Samuel 13 esp v.13-14).
 - b. He tried to act spiritually as Joshua did at Ai in finding a culprit, but without the anointing, and but for the intervention of his troops would have killed his own son (1 Samuel 14).
 - c. He tried to be an urbane politician instead of obeying the Lord regarding the Amalekite king Agag (1 Samuel 15).
4. As a consequence, he was formally rejected as king (1 Samuel 15:22-23). The Holy Spirit departed and he became a tortured soul for the rest of his days. Overcome with paranoia, he relentlessly persecuted David, his destined successor. Finally, after consulting a medium, the witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28), critically wounded, he committed suicide on the battlefield, being finished off by an Amalekite.

E. David the shepherd king (1041 – 971 BC)

1. David was Israel's greatest king – a man after God's own heart, who became the prototype for Christ's kingship. He was anointed by Samuel before Saul's death and became one of the king's court favourites, skilled in music and in battle. However, Saul

grew jealous of his success and sought to kill him. David was driven into exile and became a Robin Hood figure. Nonetheless, he continued to honour the king, even to his own hurt.

2. David's progress to the throne can be traced from Adullam (1 Samuel 22:2) where the distressed, the debtors and the discontented joined him, to Ziklag, then Hebron – and finally Jerusalem.
3. David was anointed for war. He defeated Goliath and gradually, throughout his lifetime overcame the Philistine threat. He defeated Saul's son, Ishbosheth, and went on to conquer Jerusalem, which became the capital. He also subjugated all the surrounding nations. However, his warlike activities made him an unsuitable candidate for building the Temple (2 Samuel 7).
4. David became famous as the song-writer of Israel and much of the book of Psalms owes its existence to his anointed poetry. Many of the psalms are based on his own trials and searchings. They are much more honest than our modern worship songs!
5. David also brought the ark of God to Jerusalem and set it in a tabernacle. The worship he organised was a forerunner of the Temple worship. Arguments that the worship in the Tabernacle of David were more 'charismatic' than the Temple worship are specious!
6. God made a covenant with David to continue his house – and a land for God's people – for ever (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89:3-4). The line was, however, cursed in the last king of Judah, Jehoiachin (Jeconiah), who was carried off into captivity (Jeremiah 22:24-30). Jesus' legal adoptive father, Joseph, traces his descent from Jeconiah, thus fulfilling the dynastic promise (Matthew 1:11). However, Jesus' bloodline is traced, uncursed, from Mary back to David's son, Nathan (Luke 3:31). Note the significance of the virgin birth through the uncursed line! The Davidic covenant is fulfilled in Christ (Psalm 110; Matthew 22:41-46; Psalm 45:6 cf Hebrews 1) who now reigns for ever in heaven (Revelation 5:5).
7. In his later years David made mistakes. He committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband, Uriah (2 Samuel 11). Even though he repented (Psalm 51), the event marred his reign, in spite of his marriage to Bathsheba producing Solomon. His latter years are marked by intrigue, incest, family betrayal, famine and plague.
8. What marks David as a man after God's heart is not so much a blameless life but a personal relationship with God and a steadfast refusal to tolerate paganism in his land.

F. Solomon the sophisticated king (reigned 971 – 931BC)

1. David's son, Solomon, inherited a secure kingdom but made sure of it by executing all likely contenders for the throne! In spite of this, when he asked God for wisdom, he was granted it (1 Kings 3:5-15). His wisdom became legendary and rulers from as far away as Sheba sought it (1 Kings 10). Solomon's wisdom is expressed in the book of Proverbs. This is practical 'how to live' wisdom rather than philosophic speculation.
2. The book of Job may also have been penned around this time. This is a poetic narrative tale exploring the problem of suffering for the righteous that rightly concludes that although

the righteous learn through their ordeal, there is no automatic connection between behaviour and misfortune, nor is suffering necessary for sanctification.

3. Because of his desire for wisdom, God also granted Solomon wealth (1 Kings 3:13). Solomon did not handle this so wisely. He used it to marry foreign wives, and he allowed them to bring their gods and priests into the land. He embarked on ambitious building projects using conscripted labour. He indulged in unlimited pleasure. Because of the sins involved he was rebuked by God, and only by God's promise to David was Solomon spared in his lifetime (1 Kings 11:9-13).
4. His book, the Song of Solomon, which portrays a peasant couple playing at being royalty, perhaps expresses his desire for simplicity in marriage! This is God's sex manual, an explicit romantic idyll, a pure form of Lady Chatterley's Lover which extols sexual pleasure within the context of marriage. Some see it also as a metaphor for Christ and his Bride, the church.
5. Ecclesiastes, which Solomon also wrote, is a reflective lecture to students on the human condition that sets out to prove the ultimate futility of human endeavour apart from God. Having explored wealth, sex, hedonism, knowledge, industry and power, Solomon observes that all is transitory and unsatisfactory. You have one life and it is best to serve God before you grow too old for it!
6. Solomon's greatest achievement lay in building the Temple. It was a lavish masterpiece based upon the design of the tabernacle of Moses. When the ark was placed there, the glory of God filled the house. Solomon prayed a prophetic prayer that, henceforth, was to be the plumb line for Israel's national behaviour (1 Kings 8). 'If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land (2 Chronicles 7:14).'
7. The Temple is important as a prototype of the new covenant. Jesus was the Temple, the earthly in which dwelt the heavenly (John 2:19-21). So are we (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Revelation 4-5 reveals that the earthly Temple is an expression of the heavenly one, and its design is based upon the eternal truths of God and his reign. So, the earthly has disappeared, rendered redundant by the New Covenant; we come instead to the heavenly (Hebrews 12:22-24).