

Old Testament Survey

Week 3 — Who is king? Life in the Promised Land



Review: Torah

In **Genesis**, the earth is God's realm. Even though we rebelled, he covenanted to never give up ruling us. The nations resist his kingship, so he partnered with Abraham to create the nation to showcase to the nations the blessing of his kingship.

In **Exodus**, he liberated Israel's descendants from earthly rule. He formed a covenant with them: God as their ruler; they as his nation. He led them, and gave them their laws. They built a house for their king to live among them and guide them. He moved in.

In **Leviticus**, he explained how to maintain relationship with him and keep themselves pure. They were to be holy because they represented him, the holy one.

In **Numbers**, they organised the army to take the Land, but refused to trust their sovereign to lead them in. He waited until that generation died off in the wilderness over the next 40 years.

Deuteronomy challenged the next generation to commit to the covenant God made with Israel, so they would receive his blessing rather than his chastisement.

These five books formed the foundation of Israel's life. Torah (the Law) defined their existence and purpose as God's representative kingdom.

Joshua: taking and dividing the land

Joshua takes over from Moses to lead the next generation into the Promised Land in war against the nations that lived there. YHWH promises his presence with Joshua (Josh 1:9). They cross the Jordan from the east (Josh 3–4). The new generation complies with the covenant requirement of circumcision (Josh 5). Joshua meets the commander of YHWH's army who tells him this is holy land (5:15).

They defeat the walled city of Jericho (Josh 6), but it takes two attempts to defeat the village of Ai (Josh 7–8). God gives them extra daylight for an important battle (Josh 10). There are many battles in this war (Josh 11). They defeat some kings (Josh 12), but there is still much to be conquered at the end of Joshua's life (Josh 13).

Nevertheless, they divide up the land among the twelve tribes.

Remember Jacob (Abraham's grandson)? God renamed him Israel, so the 12 sons of Jacob become the 12 tribes of Israel, but with a twist. The descendants of Levi are to be priests, so the Levites are not given a region to farm. That only leaves 11, so instead of giving any land to Joseph they treat Joseph's two sons—Ephraim and Manasseh—as tribes in their own right. Ephraim and Manasseh instead of Levi and Joseph: there are still 12 tribes.

The 12 tribes:

1. Reuben
2. Simeon
3. Judah
4. Issachar
5. Zebulun
6. Benjamin
7. Dan
8. Naphtali
9. Gad
10. Asher
- Levi
- Joseph
11. Ephraim
12. Manasseh



Source: Pfeiffer, C F (Ed). *Baker's Bible Atlas* (Baker: Grand Rapids, 1973)

They divided the land like this:

- **East** of the Jordan River was settled by *Reuben*, *Gad*, and half of *Manasseh* (Josh 13).
- The **south** was settled by *Judah* and *Simeon* (Josh 14–15, 19).
- The **centre** was given to *Ephraim* and *Manasseh* (Josh 16-17), with *Benjamin* sandwiched between centre and the south.
- The **north** was given to the other tribes: *Zebulun*, *Issachar*, *Asher*, *Naphtali*, with *Dan* at the very north (Josh 19).

(Note: Dan was allocated land west of Ephraim, but could not conquer that region, so moved to the far north.)

This geography matters: much of Israel's story assumes you know how the tribes relate to each other. For example, the tribes of the main region (west of Jordan) held suspicions that the eastern tribes wanted to be independent (Josh 22).

The Levites did not receive an allocation, since they were priests. Scattered throughout all the tribes were cities of refuge—places where someone who had committed manslaughter (not murder) could escape from a relative seeking retribution. The Levites administered these towns and their pasturelands (Josh 20-21).

Before he died, Joshua called the next generation to commit to the covenant with YHWH (Josh 23-24). How will they fare after his death?

Judges: theocracy proves impractical

Israel was meant to be a theocracy—ruled by God, not human rulers. After Joshua's death, this ideal proved elusive. With no human ruler and no visible god, the people were attracted to the Canaanite gods—Baals. Each time they took themselves out from under YHWH's care, they were powerless to defend themselves against marauding human rulers. Oppressed by these rulers they would cry out to YHWH for help. In answer to their prayers, he would raise up a *judge*—a freedom-fighter who would resolve this injustice (Judges 2:11-15). But once the judge died, they became oppressed again.

This cycle of oppression-and-release keeps repeating: **Othniel**, **Ehud**, and **Shamgar** in Judges 3. **Deborah** broke the Canaanite oppression (Judges 3-4). Then **Gideon** freed them from the Midianites, so they wanted to make him king so his sons would reign after his death. Gideon explained that he could not be king because YHWH was their sovereign (8:23). Unlike the nations, they were the kingdom of God!

Nevertheless, when Gideon died one of his sons claimed to be king. He slaughtered his 70 brothers so none of them could claim power. That's what human rulers are like. The only address in the whole book of Judges is a stinging critique of abusive human rulers (Judges 9).

After this, it all goes downhill. **Tola** and **Jair** free Israel (Judges 10). **Jephthah** kill his own daughter, so it's not surprising that he kills any who threaten his power (Judges 11–12).

Finally, the narrator sets us up to expect a real deliverer. **Samson** is born with great promise. But Samson never frees Israel from Philistine occupation. He doesn't lead Israel. He is disobedient, unfaithful, immoral, hot-tempered, and vindictive. He wastes his strength on revenge (Judges 13–16). Samson embodies everything that is wrong with human leaders.

And the problem is leadership. It doesn't work when everyone does *what is right in their own eyes* without anyone leading them (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). They make up their own religions (Judges 17–18). There is no one to sort out the injustice, so it gets really gross. A Levite's concubine is gang-raped until she is dead. He cuts up her body and sends a piece to each tribe as a demand for justice. At the end of the Book of Judges, the tribes of Israel finally band together to attack. They attack—not their enemies— but one of their own tribes: Benjamin! They are supposed to be the kingdom of God, but they are destroying each other (Judges 20–21).

Ideally, Israel is a theocracy (ruled by God), but it hasn't worked. Everybody doing what is right in their own eyes is not the same thing as a community doing what's right in YHWH's eyes (Judges 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1).

1 Samuel: Saul's kingship

Finally, there is a little boy who hears what their sovereign is saying (1 Sam 3). That's what a prophet is: someone who hears what the divine ruler is saying to his people, and delivers the message on behalf of the king. (The prophet might see the message as a dream or vision, but prophecy = declaring what the divine ruler has said/shown.)

The prophet **Samuel** led Israel well, but they still had enemies wanting to take over their land—specifically the Philistines who lived to the south-west (the Gaza strip). Israel had no earthly king to lead them into battle. They literally tried taking their heavenly king to lead them into battle—by taking his throne (the ark)! It was a disaster. The Philistines captured the ark (1 Sam 4). The symbol of the divine kingship ended up in the most profane space: an idolatrous Philistine temple.

The Philistines eventually returned YHWH's throne because it caused them too much trouble (1 Sam 5–6). But Israel still had the problem of how to fight off their enemies without a human ruler giving them their battle plans. They find this whole kingdom-of-God thing unworkable:

1 Sam 8⁴ Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah⁵ and said to him, "Behold,

you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us *like all the nations.*”

Did you get that? They find God’s leadership unsatisfactory. Instead of leading the nations back into God’s kingdom, they want to become like the nations! God says, “They have rejected me from being king over them” (8:7). Samuel warns the people that human rulers are always self-serving: they take your *sons* (8:11), your *daughters* (8:13), your *property* (8:15), and your *possessions* (8:17).

So **God concedes human kingship** to Israel. He is still king, of course, so they need to view the human king as his representative. Yet humans do not tend to handle divine power well.

Israel’s first king is **Saul**, a Benjaminite (1 Sam 9–11). But Saul is not wise. He does his own thing instead of waiting on God (1 Sam 13). He makes foolish decisions (1 Sam 14). He disobeys God’s instructions. Eventually God bypasses him, choosing David instead (1 Sam 15).

David is God’s anointed agent, though Saul still has the title of king. David defeats Goliath the Philistine (1 Sam 17). Saul is jealous: he spends the rest of his kingship hunting down David to destroy him (1 Sam 18–27). That’s what earthly rulers do: they use their power to keep power. Instead of delivering Israel from its enemies, Saul wastes all his efforts fighting David. David feels safer among the Philistines (1 Sam 27). Saul no longer hears from the heavenly king (1 Sam 28). Eventually Saul and his sons die in battle (1 Sam 31).

2 Samuel: David’s kingship

David’s tribe (Judah) makes him king (2 Sam 2). It takes another 7 years before the other tribes to accept him (2 Sam 5). David wars against their enemies. He captures Jerusalem, establishing his capital there. He moves the ark there (2 Sam 6), for **David’s primary focus is God’s throne**. David understands he represents God’s kingship.

David feels it’s not right that he has a palace while Israel’s true king has only a tent (tabernacle) for his palace. He proposes building a house for YHWH. The heavenly sovereign responds, “Thanks, but I don’t really need a house (temple). I’ll build you a house (dynasty).”

2 Sam 7 ¹¹ ... the LORD will make you a house. ¹² When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, ¹⁵ but my steadfast love will not depart

from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶ And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.

That promise defines the story of God's kingdom:

- a) YHWH will never give up on ruling through the house of David (as happened with the house of Saul).
- b) David's son (Solomon) would build the temple, recognising Israel's ultimate king.
- c) The earthly king is called *God's son*, i.e. the prince who represents the heavenly ruler on earth.

David constantly fights off their enemies (2 Sam 8–10). Nevertheless, David is an untrustworthy leader (2 Sam 11–12), with a deeply troubled family (2 Sam 13–14), and a son who tries to depose him (2 Sam 15–18). Eventually David crushed their enemies (2 Sam 22–23), and bought the spot where the temple was to be built (2 Sam 24).

1 Kings 1–11: Solomon's kingship

Solomon becomes king (1 Kg 1–2). He asked for wisdom, i.e. to know how to represent the wise heavenly king (1 Kg 3).

Solomon established much bureaucracy and wealth (1 Kg 4). He forced his subjects to work for him one month out of three (5:13ff). After 7 years they completed the temple. Then he forced them to build a palace for him, for another 13 years (6:38–7:1). By this time, the Israelites were feeling like the king's slaves, just as Samuel had said.

Solomon moved God's throne (the ark) into the new temple. The glory of YHWH's presence moved in, just like when the tabernacle was completed (8:11 compare Ex 40:38). Israel's true king has accepted the house they provided for him, and now rules his nation from between the cherubim. With his prayer, Solomon vows to be the servant of the true king who decides Israel's future (1 Kg 8).

Do the rulers of the nations see the kingdom of God here in Solomon? Yes! The queen of Sheba (south) acknowledges the true king behind Solomon, the guidance and justice of the heavenly king (10:8-9).

Yet, Solomon cannot handle power. He is preoccupied with getting for himself, collecting wealth, women, and gods. Eventually YHWH threatens to tear most of the kingdom from him (1 Kg 11). The kingdom of God is about to split, with the majority of tribes refusing to have Solomon's son ruling over them. Once again, the kingdom of God hangs by a thread with a very uncertain future.

Conclusion

Having God as ruler proved too difficult for Israel. The book of Judges documents Israel's descent into idolatry, debauchery, and civil war. They demand a king like the nations, and Saul was exactly that: a king just like the nations had. David does a better job of representing the heavenly king. Solomon starts well, but is corrupted by power. Human rulers cannot handle the power that ultimately belongs in God's hands.

The heavenly ruler promised the kingship would remain with David's household. But in the centuries that lay ahead, the majority of tribes refused to have David's descendants ruling over them. Eventually the whole Promised Land was taken by the nations, and the Davidic kingship ended.

After 600 years under foreign rule, it was astoundingly good news when John the Baptist began to preach the restoration of the kingdom of God, i.e. God becoming their king again (Matt 3:1-3). This was Jesus' main message too (Matt 4:17). Jesus is the son of David who confronted and defeated the powers that ruled God's people, restoring God's reign to the earth. He is king over all kings, Lord over all lords. But that's a long story: the OT narrative does not find its resolution until we reach the NT.

Memory verse

2 Samuel 7:12-13 (NIV)

When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom.
He is the one who will build a house for my Name,
and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

Take home exercise

Samuel's final speech brings together all the important threads of the story so far—Israel's journey as the people of God, and their rejection of YHWH as their sovereign by asking for an earthly king. Read his speech in 1 Samuel 12, and see if it makes sense to you as a summary of the story of God's kingdom up to this point.

In preparation for our next session, read these chapters:

- **1 Kings 12:** Why the kingdom split into Israel and Judah when Solomon died.
- **1 Kings 19:** After his victory on Mount Carmel, Elijah gives up confronting King Ahab.
- **2 Kings 17:** Assyria annihilated destroyed Israel (the north) in 722 BC.
- **2 Kings 25:** Babylon invaded Judah (the south) in 587 BC, taking the people into exile.