

Wisdom and Folly, Power and Prejudice: Lessons from 1-2 Kings

As the story of Israel's flirtation with monarchic power, 1-2 Kings reveals both the positive potential for growth under good leadership and the tragic results of bad leadership.

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The books of 1-2 Kings are part of a larger work that traced Israel's history from the exodus to the departure from the land under Babylonian coercion. This work, which modern scholars often call the Deuteronomistic History, spanned Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings. Written in several stages from the seventh century onward (and using older sources in many cases), the work tries to answer the basic question of why Israel lost its way, or, to use the language of Deuteronomy (especially chapter 28), why God carried out the punishments for violation of the covenant between Heaven and the chosen people.

This larger work is not an obituary, however, because it envisions not just exile, but return. Texts such as Deuteronomy 30 and 1 Kings 8 hope for a renewal of the covenant, this time for good. Just as Jeremiah 31 envisions a new covenant written in Israel's heart and not just on stone, so the Deuteronomistic History opens the door to a renewal of the dreams of faith.

In this series, we examine a number of stories in 1-2 Kings from the point of view of the overall work, which knows the end of the story and holds out hope for its re-commencement in a new, bolder, more beautiful way. The stories we consider do not stand on their own. They fit together in an integrated picture of good and bad leadership, values honored or not, relationships treasured or not. They serve those who composed, preserved, and heard them as warnings and invitations, as models of what to do and what not to do. And most of all, they witness to the surprising activity of God in the midst of the untidiness of human history.

Several major themes will surface in this study because they play major roles in the biblical texts themselves. These include

- Kingship
- The unity of Israel (two kingdoms but one people)
- The temple in Jerusalem as God's meeting place with the covenant people
- Prayer and piety
- God's graciousness to the Gentiles
- Torah as a gift and a promise
- The prophets as intermediaries between God and humankind

These themes intertwine in many of the stories we will consider. Students of 1-2 Kings should always keep them in mind.

Welcome, then, to this study of 1-2 Kings. May you grow from it, and may it lead you closer to a deeper understanding of the work of God in the world.

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Like Hezekiah, Josiah came to the throne during a time of turmoil. Before his death, he saw the Assyrian overlord humbled and then destroyed. The Bible remembers him chiefly, however, not for his politics, but for his religious reforms. Inspired by the book of Deuteronomy, he led the people of Judah back to a worship of the One God in one temple, Jerusalem. The changes of his time continue to have enormous impact on our lives even today.

Lesson 8: When Leadership is Not Enough (2 Kings 17, 21, 25)

While 1-2 Kings is not an obituary for Israel and Judah, but a record of what went wrong and a call to learn from the past, its most poignant reflections center upon the death of the two kingdoms. Avoiding a merely materialist explanation of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests, the book argues that Israel and Judah fell because of specific religious and moral failings, which it calls upon readers not to repeat. These summary reflections reveal some of the deepest insights that the book has to offer into what it means for a group to call itself the people of God.

Lesson 1: The Pursuit of Wisdom (1 Kings 3, 10)

The Bible remembers Solomon as a man of great wisdom, a temple-builder, and a consolidator of his father's warlike enterprises. Much of his record in 1 Kings seems regrettable, marked by political oppression, sexual excess, and idolatry. Yet a few stories remain to speak of what might have been, and these stories of wisdom serve as models for future leaders.

The stories of Solomon include a range of materials that work together to portray him as an exceedingly complex figure. Capable of brutality in his ascent to power (1 Kings 1-2), he also showed evidence of deep piety and moral probity. First Kings remembers him as, among other things, a great model of wisdom, a theme that the later traditions both in the Bible and beyond expanded at length. (Hence his connection to the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and later still, the Wisdom of Solomon.) Yet what is wisdom? How does one acquire it and use it?

The Hebrew word translated “wisdom” is *hokmah*, and it appears 152 times in the Bible. It can mean either technical skill, as when Exodus 31 speaks of the artisans responsible for the Tabernacle as having “wisdom,” or broader life skills, as in the preamble to Proverbs (1:1-7). Both kinds come through practice, reflection, self-discipline, and the loving criticism of a teacher. It is perhaps useful to think of this wide range of the word “wisdom” in our reflections on it. Thinking of becoming wise as a process similar to that of acquiring a skill such as fine carpentry or sewing might be a useful approach for us. Wisdom does not come by accident, but as the result of hard work and, according to many parts of the Bible, through prayer.

Solomon's Prayer for Wisdom

First Kings 3 consists of three parts. Verses 1-2 mark a transition to a new section in Solomon's story, noting his marriages to foreign women, who brought him both international prestige and religious headaches. The text then explains an element in the following story, Solomon's sacrifice at the high place of Gibeah.¹ Why was it acceptable for him to do this? Because the Temple had not yet been built, says the author of 1 Kings, who would have expected his audience to be bothered by Solomon's actions

The second part, the key one for our purposes, appears in 3:3-15. The text introduces Solomon as one who keeps the statutes of his father David, hence as a pious man from whom we should expect great things. He does not disappoint because in his encounter with God in a dream, he passes the great test imposed on him. Rather than asking for longevity, wealth, and military victory, he asks for wisdom, which would allow him, as it happens, to achieve at least some of the others.

Solomon's address to God is particularly interesting. In verses 6-9, he carefully addresses God as the one who (1) showed “steadfast love” (Hebrew, *hesed*) to David, with whom he enjoyed a mutually respectful relationship (David acted with integrity, and God

¹ A “high place” (Hebrew *bamah*) need not be elevated. It is simply an open-air sanctuary, perhaps surrounded by trees or upright stone monoliths and sanctioned by long usage as a holy place. The one at Gibeah, just north of Jerusalem, must have been particularly large because Solomon could offer there as many as 1000 animals.

rewarded him with a dynasty [see 2 Samuel 7]); (2) made him king instead of David, in spite of his lack of real qualifications (he's an inexperienced youth); and (3) can grant the most important attributes of kingship to the willing recipient. Verse 8 is particularly striking because it puts Solomon in the best possible light: "But your servant [note the deferential, respectful language throughout this prayer] is in the midst of your people, whom you chose as a great people, innumerable, unaccountably great." He acknowledges that his qualifications rank far below the challenges of his job and thus asks for divine aid.

The story so far allows the narrator to reflect on the nature of the good leader. Far from being self-sufficient or complacent, such a person recognizes his (or her) own limitations and seeks help for them. The good leader, according to 1-2 Kings, also places a higher priority on high ethical standards and personal integrity (including real courage) than on mere display of grandeur or short-term victories over foes. The rest of the book will return to this theme of the good leader (and its opposite) repeatedly.

The rest test comes in the third section of chapter 3, verses 16-28, the story of the two prostitutes and their babies. Immortalized (and laughed at) by Mark Twain's Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*, the story has a serious point in spite of its seeming triviality. (Though it would hardly be trivial to the people involved.) The wise king appears, despite his rough exterior, as a gracious and compassionate leader who seeks the welfare of people as vulnerable as the baby of a prostitute. It is curious, then, that the narration would begin with this story as an example of Solomon's wisdom because it does not quite seem to measure up to the glorious standards of temple building and tribute collecting. Yet the sort of practical issues with which leaders deal often do not rise above the unseemliness of this episode. Its real-world characteristics commended it to the earliest readers of the book, and perhaps to us.

Solomon and the Queen of Sheba

Chapter 10 returns to the theme of Solomon's wisdom by reporting the visit of the queen of Sheba, a kingdom in what is today Yemen. The Sabaeans were an advanced culture that built dams to sequester water for irrigation and drinking. Their trade in perfumes, drugs, and spices carried them to Syria-Palestine, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Ethiopia. The story in 1 Kings reports the queen's astonishment at Solomon's cleverness and wealth, confirmation of divine favor, at least to her.

Later legends married the queen to Solomon, and in the Ethiopian tradition they are the ancestors of Menelik, the first ruler of Ethiopia. These post-biblical legends have little historical value except that they rightly indicate the cultural connections between southern Arabia and the Horn of Africa.

For Further Reflection

1. What does Solomon mean in 1 Kings 3:9 by requesting a "listening heart"? For what, and to whom, do good leaders listen?
2. What do you make the story of the two women before the king? What does the story say about the vulnerability of women in their (and our) society? (For example, where are the fathers, and in what ways, if at all, are they accountable?) Does the fact that Solomon's wisdom is first on display in a family matter relate to your conceptions of leadership?

Lesson 2: The Leader and Prayer (1 Kings 8)

First Kings 8 records one of the longest prayers in the Bible. This prayer, which draws heavily on Deuteronomy's ideas of covenant-keeping and divine mercy, lays out a wide and majestic view of Israel's faith. Marked by trust in God and a willingness to find a place for human integrity and hopefulness amid the vicissitudes of history.

1 Kings 8 introduces several major theological themes in 1-2 Kings. Among them are: the covenant between God and David and God and Israel, the importance of prayer, the significance of the Temple, the majesty and greatness of God, and the leadership of the king. All of these themes are introduced, not in a sermon, but in a prayer by Solomon. Here we will examine the shape of the text and then the main themes of it.

First Kings 8:1-9:9 itself consists of three major sections:

- 8:1-21 The completion and dedication of the Temple
- 8:22-53 Solomon's Prayer
- 8:54-9:9 Conclusion of the Dedication of the Temple

The prayer of Solomon thus sits in the middle of a great event in Israel's history, the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem. This event has had repercussions lasting until today, for the site of that great structure has been a holy site ever since, and today is graced by the beautiful Dome of the Rock, a major Muslim shrine. The great retaining wall built by Herod the Great over 2000 years ago still stands, and at its base lies a synagogue at the Western Wall.

It is important in understanding this great prayer to understand also the sense of place that it assumes. In antiquity, a temple was understood to be a copy of a deity's palace in heaven. Often the temple is called the "house of god X." Here the worshiper came to the deity as at no other place. Through sacrifice, music and dancing, and prayer, the worshiper gained access to the heavenly realm. A good biblical example of this way of thinking appears in Psalm 48. On the other hand, Jeremiah critiques excessive, uncritical reliance on the Temple in Jeremiah 7.

Israel shared this basic idea, though with some modifications. As Solomon puts it in 1 Kings 8:27, a temple was not really a house for God (though the Bible often uses the phrase "house of God") in the sense that it could somehow contain God. Still, God can be said to be present there.

Verses 1-22 describe an elaborate ritual of dedication that included sacrifice, prayers, parades, and finally the indwelling of God as represented by a cloud. This last point is important. Note that when Moses dedicates the Tabernacle in Exodus 40, a cloud fills it to signal God presence (Exodus 40:34). The overall point seems to be that God has a real presence in the Temple, at least when the community of faith as a whole comes there to worship.

The Prayer of Solomon

The prayer by the king is carefully structured and theologically rich. After an introduction that associates David and Solomon with Israel's long story of redemption beginning in the exodus (vv. 25-30), it contains seven petitions:

1. Vindicate those who ask for help (vv. 31-32)
2. Help Israel after defeat (vv. 33-34)
3. Give rain to Israel (vv. 35-36)
4. Relieve famine (vv. 37-40)
5. Answer the prayers of foreigners praying in the Temple (vv. 41-43)
6. Protect Israel in battle (vv. 44-45)
7. Return deportees (vv. 46-53)

Behind these petitions lie a set of theological assumptions, including (1) the idea that God's people sometimes sin and suffer; (2) that God's concern extends even to the foreigner who has no connection to the story of redemption both friendly and hostile; (3) that appeals to past examples of God's forgiveness and faithfulness are common and useful (see, for example, Psalms 80 or 105, among many others); and (4) that suffering is, at least sometimes, punishment for community sinfulness. The most important underlying assumption is, of course, that God opts for mercy whenever possible.

Hidden within the petitions, often in the asides or clauses starting with "because" or "so that," are major witnesses to the symmetry within the story of redemption. Note, for example, that according to vv. 41-43, God should heed the prayer of the foreigner directed toward Jerusalem, so that "all the peoples of the earth may know your name and honor you." The theme of the Gentiles honoring God goes far back in the Israelites' faith, all the way back to the exodus story (see Exodus 15:14) and even the call of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3). Here it comes as a great surprise because the prayer envisions the possibility of Israel's defeat by the very Gentiles to whom God should listen. The prayer is thus very daring. This would be a surprise, as I say, except that the Bible is full of such ideas that Israel does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of the world as a whole.

Overarching Ideas

In reading this chapter, to conclude, we should consider several major ideas:

1. **Covenant.** In the ancient world, a covenant was a treaty between an overlord and a vassal. The Bible uses this metaphor to describe God's relationship with Israel. In a covenant, each side undertakes certain obligations, the violation of which lead to bad consequences. The book of Deuteronomy, from which the theology of the entire Deuteronomistic History derives, describes a covenant between God and Israel in which God promises blessings to an obedient people and curses to a disobedient one.
2. **David.** 2 Samuel 7 describes an agreement between David and God, in which God promises to bless David's royal descendants, and they promise to be faithful. 1 Kings 8 remembers that covenant and asks God to keep it. The Temple sat a couple of hundred feet from the palace of David's descendants who ruled Judah, and the building was practically a royal chapel at certain points of its history.
3. **Community.** We should note that worship here is not the activity of individuals only, but of all Israel together. This is true throughout the Bible, where the individual derives some sense of importance from the group rather than the other way around as we Americans tend to assume.

4. **Worship.** Worship in the Bible is an awe-inspiring experience. Here that is signaled by the sacrifices of huge herds of animals, by the grandeur of the building itself, and by the elaborate ritual marking its dedication.
5. **God's Faithfulness .** The prayers presuppose that God will carry out his commitments. Note that Solomon makes no effort to impress God with human goodness.
6. **Hope.** The whole point of the chapter is to hold out promise even to those who were sent into Exile on account of sinfulness.

For Further Reflection

1. Think about 1 Kings 8's understanding of place and praying in the direction of a place. Does this idea have any resonance with you at all? How does the chapter's understanding of Jerusalem as both a special place and one inadequate to contain God inform our understanding of sacred space?
2. Note the interaction between sin and repentance here. How do our prayers speak of these two realities and their relationships? Could we do better in conceiving of either or both?
3. Note how the chapter ends with a reflection on God's mercy. Where have you seen evidence of God's mercy in your own life, and the lives of those around you?
4. What are the key topics of prayer in your experience? What should they be? In your experience, what are the gaps in our prayers that we should address?

Lesson 3: Dividing a Kingdom and a People (1 Kings 12)

The division of the kingdom comes because of God's discontent with the abusive policies of the Davidic rulers. However, the results of divine intervention prove to be less than hoped for, because Jeroboam, the chosen ruler of the northern tribes, plays pragmatic politics. The text explores the relationships between power and piety, and between practicality and ideals.

According to 1 Kings, Solomon's reign left Israel with a series of political and social contradictions: great splendor at the center paid for by overwhelming taxation; an educated leadership class hostile to, and distrusted by, the people they ruled; and a beautiful temple surrounded by sanctuaries to foreign gods. Handling such contradictions well would have required a leader with a sure touch. Unfortunately, Solomon's successor Rehoboam was not such a leader. Instead, he followed the advice of his closest friends, young men who had "grown up with him," that is courtiers with little experience struggling to rise in life and little awareness of the sufferings of their fellow Israelites. He rejected the sound advice of the experienced leaders of the nation, who did not after all, encourage any sense of benevolence but simply a more pragmatic "serve them now, and they will serve you forever" (12:7). Rehoboam's foolish and arrogant handling of the peaceful tax revolt at Shechem led to the division of his kingdom, which he was powerless to avert.

At this point, the story is simply a meditation on unearned power, a pointed description of what happens when immoral people assume roles of prominence while having no principles and no grounding in life. But the story takes a more interesting turn when it brings forward the new king of the ten northern tribes (and thus of most Israelites, since Judah at that time was a primitive backwater except in Jerusalem). Jeroboam son of Nebat had experience in Solomon's government and was aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the system that the old king had built. He enjoyed divine approval and popular sanction. He thus had every opportunity to be a truly great leader. Yet he was not, and that failure to succeed did not come through inattention to the practical and reasonable (as with Rehoboam), but with an over-attachment to the pragmatic at the expense of the ideal.

Despite divine promises of his success and a divine warning to Rehoboam not to try to reassert his power, Jeroboam undertakes a new religious policy aimed at solidifying his control. That story and its aftermath consist of three basic scenes:

Scene 1: Jeroboam builds new cult centers (12:25-33)

Scene 2: A prophet speaks against the new centers (13:1-10)

Scene 3: The prophet fails to listen to God (13:11-32)

A summary statement in 13:33-34 foreshadows much of the rest of 1-2 Kings, which unflinchingly condemns the northern Israelite kings as apostates because of their support of the temples in Dan and Bethel.

Our point here is not to explore the very fascinating stories in chapter 13, which emphasize the role of the prophet as critic of the king. That theme will become ever clearer in the stories of Elijah and Elisha, which we will pick up later. The key part of the story is Scene 1, the end of chapter 12.

What really happened here? The author of 1 Kings says that Jeroboam built the new cult centers at the borders of his kingdom because he was afraid to lose control of his people if they continued to worship in Jerusalem. There must be something to that, for, after all, the community that worships together does stay together, and the annual pilgrimage to the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem would, over time, have turned the minds of people to the older unity of their nation. Or so Jeroboam might reasonably suppose. However, for 1 Kings, such a view as his seems unwarranted because Jeroboam himself has received the divine promise of kingship, and Rehoboam has heard from God that the Davidic covenant, while not abolished, is being severely re-construed. So, at some level, Jeroboam's action reflects distrust in God, and even ingratitude.

It seems unlikely that Jeroboam saw things this way, however. The story portrays him as setting up a calf in Dan and Bethel, the northern and southern border cities of his kingdom, as a way of demarcating the entire land as belonging to the deity worshiped in those sites. But who was that deity? Neither he nor his subjects thought that the deity they were worshiping was anyone other than Yahweh, the God of Israel. The calf was not a representation of the deity, but simply a symbol of the divine presence or perhaps a platform on which the deity was imagined to stand. (Perhaps a modern equivalent would be the erection of a cross in a church – no one assumes it is THE cross or that it completely represents God, and yet its presence symbolizes the entire Christian story and points to God's presence.) Thus 12:28 connects the calves to the story of the exodus, apparently with a twist. Yahweh and other gods, Jeroboam says, brought Israel from Egypt.

How innovative was this change in Israel's worship? Many modern scholars would say, not very innovative at all. Israelites had not yet agreed that there was only one God or that monotheism was the only option for Israel. That viewpoint was under intense debate and would be for several more centuries. Even Jeroboam's changes in the calendar (12:32-33) may reflect variations in local customs since many of the biblical festivals were tied to the agricultural year, the cycles of which would vary from place to place.

Nevertheless, 1 Kings understands Jeroboam's practices as a serious violation of his role as king. Perhaps the key to the book's view comes in 12:33 in the little phrase "which he had fashioned alone" (or "in his heart" – the Hebrew manuscripts disagree among themselves here, though the point is the same). Jeroboam's reforms did not come from God, but from his own political imagination. And therein lies the problem.

For Further Reflection

1. When does pragmatic thinking get in the way of being morally or spiritually serious? How do we develop the spiritual capacity to avoid taking shortcuts in our decision-making processes?
2. In this story power and piety intertwine. Think of some ways they get connected today? When is that appropriate, and when not? What are the dangers to faith when it becomes too closely associated with political, economic, or social power?
3. Arrogance corrupts, and so does insecurity. In these two kings, we see examples of both. How do we correct one without drifting into the other? What are the ingredients of a proper confidence in oneself and God that would equip us for proper leadership and service of each other?

Lesson 4: Ahab and Elijah (1 Kings 17-18)

Israelite prophets often assumed the role of culture critic, and especially the critic of kingly power. Among the most dramatic confrontations were those between Elijah and Ahab, the great ninth-century ruler and creator of Israelite power. Demonstrations of courage amid tyranny, these stories reflect some of the main themes in the prophetic critique of abusive power.

First and Second Kings contain two cycles of stories about the prophets Elijah and Elisha, as well as other stories about these inspired opponents of abusive monarchs. The great ninth-century prophets and wonderworkers, Elijah and Elisha, were particularly interesting to the authors of these books, perhaps because they showed what determined commitment to the divine will even in the face of human corruption could achieve.

The foe of Elijah, with whom we will begin, was the great ruler Ahab (reigned 873-852 BCE). The first Israelite ruler mentioned in Mesopotamian texts, he was one of the major figures of his time, a great general and builder of cities. However, the Bible remembers him chiefly as the cruel opponent of the great prophets, a puppet of his wife Jezebel and a symbol of all that could go wrong when leaders lost their regard for their subjects and their God.

The stories in 1 Kings 17-18 are, therefore, stories of confrontation, in which a heroic prophet demonstrates the superiority of Israel's God to the foreign deity Baal (and others). Today's text has two major stories, each with three scenes:

Story 1: Elijah finds hospitality in Zarephath

Scene 1: The drought as divine judgment (17:1-7)

Scene 2: First miracle at Zarephath – feeding as a sign of divine approval (17:8-16)

Scene 3: Second miracle at Zarephath – healing as a sign of divine approval (17:17-24)

Story 2: Elijah's confrontation with Ahab and the Prophets of Baal

Scene 1: Elijah and Obadiah (18:1-14)

Scene 2: Elijah and Ahab (18:15-19)

Scene 3: Elijah and the Prophets on Mount Carmel (18:20-46)

Both stories are familiar and require little rehearsal here, but a route into a deeper appreciation of them lies in understanding how they are placed together to create meaning larger than the individual stories would have alone, and how they draw characters that provide models for the readers' moral reflection.

To take the first issue, the stories are structured around a series of oracles from Yahweh, Israel's God. At each juncture, God speaks to tell the prophet, who is always obedient, what to do and why to do it. See 17:1, 8; 18:1. However, complementing the speeches of God are the speeches of Elijah, either to God, or to a human being on God's behalf. Thus when seeking to heal the dead Gentile boy in Zarephath, Elijah challenges God to respond to the widow's hospitality, not by allowing a death, but by bringing about life. And, as 17:22 puts it, "Yahweh heard the voice of Elijah." In other words, the communication could go both ways.

That brings us, then, to the issue of character development. The stories show us these people usually through side remarks, brief comments on their character, as well as by quoting their conversations. Thus Obadiah appears as a brave person willing to take risks in hiding prophets, but unwilling to confront Ahab face to face. The widow figures as a hospitable person, but also as someone who understandably fears her prophetic guest as someone around whom disease and famine linger (after all, Elijah, the “man of God,” does seem to bring disaster wherever he goes!). Ahab appears as a tyrant, but also as one afraid of Elijah and thus, at some level, of God. And Elijah himself, perhaps the least developed or flattest character of all, moves from one confrontation to another without hesitation or regret (a fact that makes his petition to God on behalf of the boy all the more remarkable).

However, the most complex character here is that of God. It is instructive to trace the actions attributed to the deity here: bringing a drought and ending it; speaking and listening to a prophet; providing food for one hungry Gentile family while a nation experiences famine and drought; bringing life from death (compare Psalms 16; 17; 49 and many others); and demonstrating power unavailable to the other gods, including the great storm god Baal. It is not just a question of power at stake here, however. The real question is whether the God of Israel is worth having a relationship with. The stories of divine care here for the righteous, made still more clear in chapter 19, point to a positive answer to the question.

For Further Reflection

1. A theme in chapter 17 is God’s provision to Gentiles, an idea that appears repeatedly in 1-2 Kings. What do you make of the Gentile woman’s hospitality? Why does the text emphasize it and understand it as an act that obliges God to act on her behalf?
2. Signs and wonders play a major role in Elijah’s story, and in the stories of conversions at various times in Christian history. What role do such stories play for us today, even if we have experienced no such wonders (assuming we haven’t)? What do these events say about the God of the Bible?
3. Obadiah is portrayed here as a responsible leader trying to make the best of a difficult situation. What are the moral limits of behaviors open to persons in such a position? What challenges and opportunities do they face? When must they stand against the movements of power, and when should they be accommodating?

Supplement: A Sermon on 1 Kings 17

Sometimes waking up in the morning is not that easy. Sometimes because you didn’t sleep enough. Sometimes because your pillow was a stone, and your dreams were no different than the horrors of lying awake. Most of all, it is difficult to get up in the morning when you have reached a decision about the future and realize that you have none; your decision is irrevocable, final. So it is in our story. It must have been difficult waking up that morning for the young woman whose name we’ve lost, the widow of Zarephath. Perhaps she looked over at her little boy, all that was left to remind her of a dead husband. There was almost nothing to feed him. Today they would begin to die.

How had it come to this? The drought played its part of course. Some said the drought was deity’s way of warning the powerful to pay attention. If so, it was not entirely successful. The rich were doing just fine, thank you. For the poor, it was a different story. No one could share, there was nothing to spare. Empty breadbaskets and empty bellies except for a few. Perhaps she remembered the hushed conversations with those who had more. “Isn’t this your mother’s jewelry? Are you sure you want to part with it? Oh, I wish I could give you more, but business is hard up these days.” It’s hard to forget your neighbors’ “no I can’t help

you,” and hard to keep saying to an eager boy but increasingly thin boy who loves his mother, “Oh no, son, I’m not hungry. You eat,” when even the smallest child could see fear in her eyes and discern that odd odor of the malnourished. Today we eat, and someday soon we die. What could be clearer? Waking up to that plan is a difficult proposition.

So there she is, our anonymous widow, gathering sticks enough to cook a last meal. Did she feel the pitying eyes of neighbors? Or, perhaps not pity really, but rather a sort of grim relief. Pity would imply a willingness to help. Relief comes when we know that the other person’s very existence no longer challenges us to offer a cup of water. For, when the poor die, at least the rest of us have the satisfaction of lament and guilt, the voyeur’s ultimate satisfaction.

When your plans are made and you have accepted your fate, meeting a stranger who promises to bring another one presents difficulties, especially when the stranger is one of those wild-eyed prophets coming from the desert, the sort who had seen some things no one else had. God perhaps. The trouble with those who see God is that sometimes those so bedazzled cannot see anything else for the glare. Or sometimes they see everything as it is, not as it seems to be. Which way the prophet will go – that’s anybody’s guess.

So it is in our story. God says, “I have commanded a widow woman there to support you.” It’s not clear that God had bothered to tell her yet, but the plan is in place. The prophet will speak and, against every impulse in the human soul, which tends inevitably to self-preservation and the blindness we amusingly call common sense, she agrees to prepare the last meal not for her hungry son, but for the strange man from the desert. She who has nothing to give becomes the giver, and in doing so, she whom her neighbors have abandoned and left for dead – this is what pagans do; it’s what makes them pagans – becomes the hostess, not just for a prophet used to the service of less communicative waiters who can only croak “Nevermore.” Hospitality is the foundation of all society. To refuse to accept from another is the ultimate violation of human trust. Conversely, by placing himself in a position of dependence, the man who spoke to God could allow someone else the chance to live fully.

It’s such a simple story, this one. It’s a story of divine provision, of never-failing Wonder bread and extra virgin olive oil. A woman who had resigned herself to death reenters the world, not just as a recipient of someone else’s generosity, but as a conduit of grace to others. A prophet – and all of us readers – learns to look beyond his usual circle of contacts to find God at work. True, the story presents all sorts of conundrums: why did the God who could set up a raven airlift let a stream run dry? Why send a prophet to be fed, not at home, not even by wealthy Gentiles who might welcome him as an interesting diversion at their cocktail parties, but by the poorest of the poor, and a woman at that? Why? But in addition to all our questions, the answer sounds forth. This is a story about God’s hospitality to the smallest of us, about whom it would be fitting to use the words of the poet Joseph Brodsky:

I did not see, will not see your tears,
I will not hear the rustling of wheels,
Carrying you to the bay, to the trees,
Along the fatherland without a memorial to you.

Yes, this story is a memorial: to a prophet who stood up to power and embodied in his life a radical obedience to God, and to an otherwise forgotten woman who had given up hope, and thus it memorializes the human race as a whole, since most of our species are poor, obscure, and struggling. The story reminds us that our task of Christian service and leadership around the world cannot be tamed and domesticated in the channels we often seek to make them run in. But there is a deeper sense in which the real hero of this story is a God whose care extends to pagans, to the frightened, to the despairing. This God offers hope by placing those who have met him face to face among those who have not. (And, by the way, it’s not always easy to tell who is who.) God takes us from the valley of despair and the cesspool of guilt to the mountain of hope, where we can enter his banqueting hall and share in a bounty that knows no limits.

In our pagan world, in a world of swelling GDPs and ever more capable armies, of growing poverty and declining life expectancies in the poorest parts of the world, the people of God easily begin to practice an accounting system quite alien to God’s. We give the microphone to the shrill voices telling us that all is well, all is well. We strut and fret our hour on the stage, hoping that our words are more than sound and fury, and that they do signify something. Which they do not. And in our use of noise to silence the vulnerable, we forget that God – whose opinion, after all, may be the only one that counts – has a different accounting system that makes him say strange things like, “I have commanded a widow to care for you,” or “I am the resurrection and the life,” or even “death will be swallowed up in victory.” Now that’s something to get up in the morning for!

Lesson 5: Leaders in the World of Miracle (2 Kings 4-5)

Unlike the prophets whose names grace books of the Bible, the prophets of the ninth century, especially Elijah and Elisha come down to us as wonderworkers, purveyors of miracle whose interactions with the world challenged easy assumptions about human ability to control their surroundings, whether through religion or any other method. The Elisha stories, in particular, show him as a dramatic figure whose actions point to the surpassing power and goodness of Israel's God.

“As Elijah was, so Elisha is, only more so.” That is the message of the stories about the younger prophet in 2 Kings. The astonishing work of God through the prophets did not end with the assumption of Elijah into heaven (truly a remarkable event!) but continued through his most eminent disciple and the rest of their circle, the so-called “sons of the prophets.” The stories in 2 Kings closely follow those in 1 Kings. Both prophets provide oil for a destitute family. Both raise dead children. Both receive hospitality from unlikely persons. And both confront the rulers with their misdeeds. On the surface, it seems that nothing has changed.

But what has changed is the external surroundings that the prophets face. Although Ahab's successors are no less brutal than their father, they lack his military and administrative genius. And thus they are unable, according to 2 Kings, to avoid the decay that always befalls dynasties. Elisha and his disciples roam around an Israel in decline and face a monarchy in trouble. Pressured by foreign invasion and internal famine, the king of Israel whom Elisha faces in chapter 4 seems to be a weak ruler, afraid of his own shadow and so despairing of hope that he cannot imagine anything happening in Israel as splendid as a healing of a leprous leader from Damascus. The change of scenery thus profoundly affects the stories before us. Though outwardly so similar to those in 1 Kings, they differ profoundly from them.

The two stories considered here closely resemble those about Elijah in 1 Kings. These chapters consist of two acts, each with five scenes:

Act 1: Elisha with His Disciples and Others

Scene 1: A miracle of oil for a widow of a disciple (4:1-7)

Scene 2: Elisha and the Shunnamite woman (4:8-17)

Scene 3: Elisha heals the widow's son (4:18-37)

Scene 4: The “poison” soup (4:38-41)

Scene 5: A feeding with outside help (4:42-44)

Act 2: Elisha and Naaman the Damascene

Scene 1: Naaman in Aram (5:1-5)

Scene 2: Naaman in Samaria (5:6-7)

Scene 3: The healing of Naaman (5:8-14)

Scene 4: The “conversion” of Naaman (5:15-19)

Scene 5: Gehazi takes a bribe and is punished (5:20-27)

A key feature of the stories is the way in which the prophet reveals to a Gentile audience the might and graciousness of Israel's God. This revelation, in turn, helps the Israelite audience of the story (after all, you had to speak Hebrew to understand them!) recall the same point.

This message becomes clear in the fourth scene of the Naaman story (5:15-19). A sort of conversion story much like those of Ruth or Rahab, which were also responses to acts of divine mercy, this event underscores the key elements of Israel's confession of faith, all coming from the mouth of the Gentile general:

- (1) "there is no God in all the earth except in Israel" (v. 15)
- (2) This God deserves to be honored through sacrifice (v. 17)

The story contains a fascinating subtext of gift-giving, which also reveals something about the theology at stake. Naaman, like many ancient people, believed that relationships were established through the exchange of presents. He had received an enormous gift, healing, and he sought to return the favor in the most lavish way he could. Ordinarily in the ancient world, such a gift would have gone to the temple of the deity being honored, but here, perhaps since the healing had not taken place in a temple, Naaman offers the gift to the intermediary of God's grace, the prophet Elisha. Elisha declines the gift without explanation, though we need not struggle too much to guess it. He appears in these texts as very poor and dependent on the largesse of others, and such a magnificent gift would have altered his life status in a radical way. In any case, he declines to enter into a relationship based on reciprocity with Naaman, as if to say that the gifts of God cannot be bought or even repaid. (And this is why Gehazi's bribe-taking is so offensive; his sin is not ordinary greed, but also a misunderstanding of the nature of trust in a benevolent God.)

The other interesting thing about Naaman's conversion is that he resumes his previous life, including his religious commitments. The text does not expect him, a foreigner, to give up the worship of other gods entirely. Unlike Isaiah 40-55 and other later texts, inside or outside the Bible, 1-2 Kings does not fault Gentiles for worshipping other deities. "What can one expect?" it seems to say. Naaman's willingness to pray to the God who has healed him seems adequate for the moment. In this text, then, we see the beginnings of an idea of conversion to Judaism, not the fully developed version of the idea as it came to be known by the time of Jesus.

For Further Reflection

1. How do the characters in these stories deal with fear of loss, or the reality of loss itself? Do you find their reactions realistic? Instructive? How would you respond in similar circumstances?
2. What assumptions do the characters in these stories make about the nature of God and God's interactions with the world? Are their assumptions plausible? How do your assumptions differ from, or resemble, theirs?
3. Physical well-being often relates to spiritual health in a complex way. The Old Testament often portrays God as one who seeks the well-being of people in every aspect of their lives. How important is physical health to spiritual health? What are the limits of the connection? How should we talk about issues of health in church?

Lesson 6: Hezekiah in Sickness and in Health (2 Kings 18-20)

The illness of a major leader always poses problems for the group he or she leads, especially during times of extreme external crisis. All these pressures marked the reign of Hezekiah, who had to face Assyrian invasion, movements of refugees, domestic intrigue, and a range of related problems. He led in such a time by calling for reform, and this is why Israel remembers him as one of its greatest leaders.

The reign of Hezekiah was one of the most troubled times in the history of the ancient Near East. The vast Assyrian Empire, centered in northern Mesopotamia, expanded to absorb all of Syria, much of modern Turkey and Iran, and then northern Israel itself. Samaria fell to the Assyrian ruler Sargon II in 722 BCE, ending a decade of warfare and ceasefires with the total annihilation of the northern kingdom of Israel. The destruction of northern Israelite cities led to refugees settling in the south, with Jerusalem itself more than doubling in size and acquiring new fortifications and an expanded water supply system (the Broad Wall recently found by archaeologists, and Hezekiah's Tunnel, respectively).

The age of Hezekiah also saw, as far as we can tell, a religious revival. Many scholars believe that this was the era in which the material in the books of Deuteronomy, Hosea, Micah, Amos, and Isaiah came to prominence. There are many learned debates about how much of this prominence is innovative (certainly Isaiah was active during this time), and how much continues older ideas and practices. But it does seem clear that many people in Judah and Israel were very interested in preserving what they could of their own past and seeking the guidance of Yahweh for the future. Perhaps good examples of this overall attitude appear in Isaiah 2-12.

In any case, 2 Kings 18-20 portrays him as a reformer and a pious man who dealt with serious problems in thoughtful ways. There are four major acts in his story, plus a summary statement:

- Act 1: Hezekiah's initial reforms (18:1-8)
- Act 2: Hezekiah's struggle with Assyrian (18:9-19:37)
- Act 3: Hezekiah's illness and recovery (20:1-11)
- Act 4: Hezekiah's Babylonian misadventure (20:12-19)
- Summary statement (20:20-21)

Most of this material, with slight alterations here and there, appears in Isaiah 36-39, probably because of the close, and mostly friendly, connection between the king and prophet in the stories.

Several strands of Hezekiah's work as a reformer deserve attention. The first is the nature of the reform itself, as seen in 18:1-8. Unlike modern popular movements that bubble up from the masses (or so we claim), ancient reform movements usually involved those at the top of the society. And so it is here. Moreover, Hezekiah's actions seem to combine a return to a particular view of the past, the Mosaic ideal, with a disregard for certain long-established customs. Thus he closed the open-air sanctuaries ("high places") and even desecrated them despite their long established usage by families and

communities throughout Israelite history. He destroyed the copper snake Nehushtan, which goes back to Moses because it had become an “idolatrous” figurine. And he eliminated sacred objects associated with Asherah, even though both Israel and the Canaanites who preceded them had worshiped that goddess for uncounted centuries.

The explanation for this approach to reform comes in 18:5-6: Hezekiah trusted Yahweh in unprecedented ways. He sought divine guidance at every turn.

Second, it is not hard to see that this reform of Hezekiah’s generated much hostility or at least uncertainty among his subjects, so much so that the Assyrian leader, the Rabshakeh, tried to play upon local discontent in his speech against Hezekiah (18:22). Apparently, the reforms had gained international attention no doubt because of their extreme oddness. The idea that one should worship only one God and in only one place, though the default assumption of a book like Deuteronomy, was very unusual in Hezekiah’s world.

Third, Hezekiah’s changes combined with the external reactions to his aggressive foreign policy (he tried to subjugate Philistia and revolted against Assyria) led to serious theological reflection in Jerusalem. Even the Rabshakeh picked up on this in 18:33-35, when he challenged the people’s assumption that Yahweh was powerful enough to protect them from the Assyrians and their gods. The narrator wants readers to hear that statement as irony: the Assyrian spokesman was wrong. Yet the theological reflection does not end there. Rather it continues throughout the stories about Hezekiah.

Fourth, the deepest expressions of this reflection appear in Hezekiah’s prayers in 19:14-19 and 20:3. The latter is a simple, heartfelt prayer for healing, a cry from the heart from a deeply religious person who feels (rightly) that he much left to do. The former is even more interesting. At the height of the Assyrian crisis, when his entire kingdom except Jerusalem has been burned and pillaged, he prays to Yahweh as the creator and sustainer of the world, and the divine ruler of all. He invites God to look at, and listen to, the actions of the Assyrian foe, which he interprets as attacks on the “living God.” He confesses that Yahweh is the creator, while the other gods are merely the creations of human beings, a theme that will play a major role in all subsequent reflections on the nature of the deity (see Isaiah 41, for example). He clinches the argument for divine intervention by saying that thereby will all the nations of the world know that “Yahweh alone is God” (v. 19).

Fifth, the responses to these requests come in oracles through the prophet Isaiah, who promises the defeat of the invaders and, later, the healing of the sick king. God appears here as one who deeply cares for the welfare of Israel, in spite of all appearances to the contrary.

For Further Reflection

1. It is difficult to have the courage to make significant changes during times of crisis, yet Hezekiah does so. What does it take to do so? What attributes of character or resources are needed by those who wish to lead boldly?
2. What is the connection between prayer and leadership in the church? Hezekiah seems to feature prayer prominently in his understanding of his role. What could we learn from that fact? Why, in your view, does prayer play so small a role in our conceptions of religious leadership?

Lesson 7: Josiah and His Reforms (2 Kings 22-23)

Like Hezekiah, Josiah came to the throne during a time of turmoil. Before his death, he saw the Assyrian overlord humbled and then destroyed. The Bible remembers him chiefly, however, not for his politics, but for his religious reforms. Inspired by the book of Deuteronomy, he led the people of Judah back to a worship of the One God in one temple, Jerusalem. The changes of his time continue to have enormous impact on our lives even today.

Second Kings remembers Josiah as a great reformer, like Hezekiah. However, his reforms differed in intensity and quality, partly because the historical situation had changed. The great Assyrian empire, in full flood during Hezekiah's reign in the late eighth century, had come to the verge of collapse early in Josiah's reign. A terrible civil war had weakened the empire. It collapsed during Josiah's lifetime, falling to the Babylonians, Medians, and Scythians in a coalition that Judah also tried to help.

The biblical story does not focus on these great regional political issues, however. Instead, it concentrates on the religious dimensions of Josiah's rule, for it was during his time that a major event in Judah's history occurred. The fight for monotheism became closely connected to a book and the interpretation of that book.

That book was Deuteronomy, or some part of Deuteronomy, which the priests found in the temple during a long overdue renovation of the then three centuries-old structure. The newly discovered book, whose authenticity was verified by the prophetess Huldah, and whose message led to national reform, drew the king's attention to the sharp contrast between the ideals of the Mosaic faith and the realities of Judah's practices.

The story of Josiah consists of several parts:

Scene 1: The rebuilding of the temple and the finding of the "book of the Torah" (22:1-10)

Scene 2: Validation of the book by Huldah (22:11-20)

Scene 3: The people's acceptance of the covenant laid out in the book (23:1-3)

Scene 4: Josiah's reform in 627 BCE (23:4-25)

Scene 5: The final assessment of his reign and his tragic fate (23:26-35)

In assessing Josiah's story and its relevance for modern readers, we should think about what he did and why it seemed significant to the authors of 2 Kings.

First, the finding of a book might not seem an adequate motivation for a wide-ranging change in the religious practices of an entire nation. Yet the book's specific message plus the prophetic validation of it by Huldah were sufficient to commend it to the king and the people. Partly this was because the finding of old books in temples was a well-known happening in the ancient world, and such books drew the attention of their discoverers because they bore witness to past values worth recovering.

Second, the specific contents of the book led to Josiah to carry out a series of reforms. These actions included (1) the destruction of vessels dedicated to Baal and Asherah in the Temple in Jerusalem, (2) the desecration of holy places throughout rural and urban regions of Judah and even the then Assyrian province of Samerina (formerly the northern kingdom of Israel), (3) the destruction of altars and incense burners on rooftops, (4) the desecration of the *tophet* or cemetery for children sacrificed in the Valley of

Hinnom, (5) the removal of horses and other cult objects in the Temple dedicated to a range of deities, (6) the destruction of rooms in the Jerusalem temple compound in which women wove garments for Asherah, and (7) the elimination of various installations used in necromancy and divination.

This list gives the impression that Judah was a land full of religious symbols. Apparently, one could hardly go anywhere without encountering many signs of the country's deep religiosity and interest in pleasing the divine realm and knowing its will. Thus Josiah's removal of all these symbols would have disrupted centuries of practice and belief in many cases. And it would have threatened to separate the king's subjects from the world of the sacred unless something took the place of all those holy sites and symbols.

The replacement came in two forms, in addition to the great Temple that stood now majestic in its solitary position as the only legitimate place to offer sacrifice to Yahweh. The first replacement form was a book itself. The heavy emphasis on Scripture as the major location of knowledge of the will of God goes back, as far as anyone can tell, primarily to the reign of Josiah. The second replacement appears in the reform's emphasis on Passover. Though already an old feast commemorating the exodus, Israel's primal story of origins and orientation, the Passover had fallen on hard times (see 23:21-23). Josiah knew that reclaiming a major festival would unite the nation and help it remember its core story and thus its core identity. The twin emphasis on calendar and text would become the hallmark of Judaism, and later, Christianity.

As 2 Kings presents it, then, Josiah's reform seems very radical and intense. Perhaps things were less turbulent in the moment. Certainly the changes did not stick in the short run, for after Josiah's death, Judah returned to the ways he had sought to change, and the destruction of the nation occurred in spite of his best efforts.

This last fact may give us an opportunity for sober reflection. No reform movement has a permanent effect on the lives of a community. To survive, much less flourish, any group of people must always be reforming, always seeking renewal. Judah's failure to do so led to its downfall, as 2 Kings argues.

For Further Reflection

1. Change always involves both discarding old things and adding or reclaiming new ones. In Josiah's case, reform meant casting off many old, time-honored practices that people regarded as holy. What do we need to do to reexamine our practices to determine whether they are legitimate or not? How do we decide in the absence of a found book or a king's commands?
2. Josiah changed how his people thought about sacred space. The Temple became, as Deuteronomy expected, the only place for sacrifice and thus the holiest spot on earth. How do you think about sacred space? In what ways do the spaces in which the church meets function this way for you? Why or why not?
3. Josiah also changed how his people thought about sacred time, particularly Passover. This time commemorated the key event in Israel's history, the exodus. The renewed celebration of Passover would bring the people together and help them live in light of the values of the exodus. How do our times of worship bring us together and reinforce or correct our spiritual values? When and why do they fail to do so under certain circumstances?

Lesson 8: When Leadership is Not Enough (2 Kings 17, 21, 25)

While 1-2 Kings is not an obituary for Israel and Judah, but a record of what went wrong and a call to learn from the past, its most poignant reflections center upon the death of the two kingdoms. Avoiding a merely materialist explanation of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests, the book argues that Israel and Judah fell because of specific religious and moral failings, which it calls upon readers not to repeat. These summary reflections reveal some of the deepest insights that the book has to offer into what it means for a group to call itself the people of God.

As we have already noted, 1-2 Kings was written in part to explain why Israel and Judah fell to foreign invaders. It is not, however, merely an obituary, but instead a meditation on how bad and good leadership can shape the behavior of a community over several centuries.

On several occasions, 2 Kings steps back from its story to comment on why tragedy befell Israel and Judah in spite of all their advantages deriving from the blessings of God. These reflections function as a warning to the future, and an invitation to imagine an alternative direction.

The first extended discussion of the reasons for the fall appears in 2 Kings 17, which reflects on the destruction of Samaria in 722 BCE by the Assyrians. The text draws a sharp contrast between the behavior of God, on the one hand, and of Israel, on the other. Whereas God has (1) brought Israel from Egypt, (2) driven out the Canaanites, (3) forbidden idolatry, (4) made promises through the prophets, and (5) given laws worth following to the ancestors through the prophets, Israel (1) honored other gods, (2) followed the rules of the nations, (3) attended to words that were not so, (4) built high places in every city, (5) erected inappropriate cult symbols, (6) worshiped idols, (7) rebelled, (8) rejected Yahweh's instructions, and (9) pursued empty things (i.e., served various gods other than Yahweh). In short, Israel acted in ungrateful, disrespectful, and inexplicably irrational ways. They abandoned their relationship with the God of the exodus by behaving in ways that erased any distinction between them and pagans around them. The text distinguishes between the northern and southern kingdom, preferring the second to the first, but hints strongly that any distinctions are of degree, not of kind.

The second discussion of the nation's tragic fall comes in 2 Kings 21, the description of the reign of Manasseh. Portrayed as a flagrant idolater, this ruler managed to keep Judah intact and at peace for almost six decades. Yet he did so by reversing his father's reforms and returning to a state of religiously problematic behavior (from the point of view of 2 Kings, at least). In fact, 2 Kings blames Judah's final demise on Manasseh, despite the fact that the kingdom survived his death by more than half a century. So scandalous was his behavior, that its impact long outlived him.

The third discussion comes in 2 Kings 25, which reports the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE. It would be hard to overestimate the importance of this event because the exile that followed led Israelites to collect and distribute their sacred writings in fuller form. Without the Babylonian exile, there would be no Bible and no Judaism (hence, no Christianity). Reflection on this exile appears all over the Bible, profoundly shaping the ways in which all of us think. Before the exile, many Israelites were

polytheists. Theirs was not a book religion, not focused on individual or group obedience to law, and in short not always very different from the religions of their neighbors. After the exile, everything was different. Yet, whatever the positive benefits of this tragedy, the fall of the nation to the Babylonians was also a terrible disaster that took generations to undo.

For us modern readers trying to make sense of this text, a few lessons surely come to mind. First, it seems clear that sound leadership is a necessary but not sufficient condition of a group's success. The entire community bears a responsibility for its own flourishing. Good followers are as important as good leaders. Second, since 1-2 Kings express a deep-seated distrust of overly powerful leaders (see also 1 Samuel 8), we also may consider whether the top-down style of reform that even the best kings of Judah practiced might be problematic. Power always presents the temptation to take shortcuts, to seek temporary success at the expense of long-term formation of people. Yet without the patient cultivation of the habits of virtue in the whole group, any project of reform is doomed to failure. Third, however, one of the most powerful lessons of 1-2 Kings is that tragedy need not be the final answer. Even during a time of utter disaster and widespread failure, there are reasons for hope and resources for recovery. These books, by telling stories of complex leaders and their successes and failures, seek to provide one such resource – truth. For in telling the truth, no matter how inconvenient it seems, we find freshness and life.

For Further Reflection

1. What capacities for spiritual growth should leaders help us cultivate? How can we become good followers?
2. Ingratitude seems to have been a major spiritual flaw in Israel and Judah, according to 1-2 Kings. The authors understood Israel's behavior in those terms because they conceived of freedom, the land, and spiritual opportunities as gifts from a benevolent God. How could we avoid ingratitude and maintain our relationships with God?
3. The texts we have studied in this series seek to consider the mistakes and missed opportunities of their past, as well as the less frequent occasions on which Israelites got it right. As we think about our own past as a religious community, what lessons do we learn? What have we done well? Not so well?
4. What sorts of leaders do you value? What makes those leaders successful? How can we raise up successful leaders for tomorrow's church?