The books of the Bible we know as 1 Kings and 2 Kings began their literary lives as a single document, “Kings,” inscribed in charcoal-based ink on a series of leather pieces stitched together and wound into a scroll. Seen as a single scroll then, Kings begins and ends with portraits of impotent potentates.

It starts with an image of an aged David in decline, shivering next to the maiden Abishag, “a beautiful girl” (1 Kings 1:1–4). The great king “who did not know her sexually” (1:4) evidently cannot achieve circulation to his extremities. Kings finishes, four hundred years later, with David’s royal descendant King Jehoiachin as a prisoner of war in Babylon (2 Kings 25:27–30). The last of the line, the end of the line.

This single scroll of Kings peaks in its middle section with the prophetic heroism of Elijah and his disciple Elisha (1 Kings 17—2 Kings 11). The two
took turns troubling the reigning dynasty in Israel, especially its most infamous king, Ahab, and his queen, Jezebel. That’s where all the great stories are.

Elijah performs a food miracle and resuscitates a dead boy in the village of Zarepath (1 Kings 17:8–24). Elijah withholds and restores rainfall over the entire region of Ephraim (1 Kings 17—18). Elijah faces off against 400 Canaanite priests on Mount Carmel in a kind of priestly Olympics (1 Kings 18:17–40). Elijah undertakes a Mosaic pilgrimage to Mount Horeb where he receives his own revelation of the LORD, not in the thundering style familiar from Exodus but in “a still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:4–18). Elijah stands up for the rights of the peasant Naboth, the family farmer who was murdered and had his estate seized by royal chicanery (1 Kings 21). Elijah ascends to heaven with bands of angels (2 Kings 2:11–12), and his successor Elisha parts the Jordan river by striking
it with the rolled-up animal-skin mantle that his master had earlier placed on his shoulders (2 Kings 2:13–14; cf. 1 Kings 17:19).

Elisha is just as vividly and memorably powerful, performing food miracles (2 Kings 4:1–7; 4:38–44), helping barren couples conceive (2 Kings 4:11–17), raising the dead (2 Kings 4:18–37), and healing the Syrian general Naaman of leprosy (2 Kings 5).

Given the contrast between wonder-working prophets in the center of the book and the hapless, faithless monarchs whose reigns are chronicled in the bulk of Kings’ narrative, the title of the book seems farcical. “Kings”? Better, “Prophets!” And, sure enough, as we read 1 and 2 Kings two and a half millennia later, the virtues and vitality of the Hebrew prophetic tradition continue to inspire, long after the end of monarchies in Israel and Judah.
**Date and Composition**

But even when Kings was still a single scroll, it was never meant to be read in isolation. From its origins, it was part of a larger story, the narrative of the Former Prophets (the traditional Jewish term for Joshua through Kings), also known as the Deuteronomistic History (the contemporary scholarly term). None of these books name their authors, though Jewish tradition assigned Kings to the prophet Jeremiah. Safer to say that Kings, like its companion volumes Joshua-Judges-1 and 2 Samuel, was written by a priestly historian whose name is unknown to us. He began his life and this work in Jerusalem in the late 7th century B.C.E. and finished it during the Exile around the middle of the 6th century B.C.E. I assume the writer was male because it is more likely for a man than a woman in Iron Age Jerusalem to have access to the Temple archives and royal administrative documents that were incorporated into this work. But this author
was more than a compiler. He was also a collector of prophetic lore, mainly from the northern region of Israel, which he artfully put into written form.

We are looking for a man whose feet were in 6th century Jerusalem, but whose heart was in the highlands of Ephraim where a series of prophets arose to champion the legacy of Moses and Samuel in the 9th and 8th centuries B.C.E. The Talmud could have it right; the prophet Jeremiah does fit this bill, though it is hard to imagine a man who complained about a fire in his bones (Jeremiah 20:9) sitting still long enough to complete such an epic. As the biblical scholar Richard Elliott Friedman has suggested, Jeremiah’s scribal companion Baruch is a more likely candidate. We know, both from the book of Jeremiah and from an inscription unearthed in Jerusalem from the 6th century with Baruch’s name on it, that he wrote for a living.
Kings as Part of the Narrative of the Former Prophets

Seen as the final volume of the Joshua-Judges-Samuel-Kings anthology, the scroll of Kings represents a narrative nadir. In Joshua, the Israelites enter the Promised Land; in Kings, they exit to Babylonian exile. The tribes whose frontier fortunes are depicted in Joshua and Judges evolve into a single political state in Samuel, then fracture into two nations, Israel and Judah in 1 Kings, before their respective capitals fall to Mesopotamian superpowers: Samaria to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E. (2 Kings 17) and Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. (2 Kings 24–25).

Scanning this entire story, the book of Joshua depicts a faithful start as the tribes under the leadership of Joshua entered Canaan, subdued its towns with “God on their side,” and divided the territorial spoils among their clans. (We cannot help but note that modern readers often find the ethnic cleansing
and genocide depicted in Joshua as less edifying than the ancients did.) This rise is followed in Judges by a fall, as the cohort of fractious tribal warlords and chieftains that follow were unable to sustain a culture of fidelity to Mosaic religious practices and of common Abrahamic peoplehood. The books of 1 and 2 Samuel, also a single scroll originally, survey a detailed narrative landscape full of many internal peaks and valleys as the prophet-priest Samuel anoints, first, the tragically flawed Saul and, then, the flawed but divinely charmed David as kings. Up and down, the narrative rhythm of the Former Prophets quartet beats: rising in Joshua, declining in Judges, rising again in Samuel, before collapsing in Kings.

**The Theological Contribution of Kings**

But despite its downbeat ending, Kings holds out hope for the covenant people Israel. Once every century or so,
an honest man sat on the throne of Judah, a man sympathetic to the prophets’ Mosaic traditionalism: a David, a Jehoshaphat (2 Kings 3:14), a Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:3-8), and, most of all, a Josiah (2 Kings 23:25), the late sixth-century king of Judah who probably—though not all scholars agree—sponsored the very composition of the scroll of Kings and its prequels, Joshua, Judges, and Samuel. All these monarchs were members of the Davidic dynasty, which despite its share of corrupt, venal, and weak rulers remained intact for the entire four-hundred-year existence of Judah. In the final paragraph of Kings, the Judahite king Jehoiachin may be in exile in Babylon, but he is still alive, as is the author of Kings’ implicit hope that future generations will be chastised and inspired enough by his chronicle to rebuild their society with attention both to the prophets’ teachings and to David and Solomon’s nation- and temple-building.
**Moral causality:** The dominant theological principle of the scroll of Kings is that God administers justice on the basis of moral cause and effect, rewarding virtue and punishing vice. The book of Kings provides a moral audit of every dynasty and era, and explains how every prosperity was the fruit of righteousness and every disaster grew from idolatry or injustice.

When the Babylonians took scores of Judahites into exile in a series of early-sixth-century deportations and when they destroyed the Temple in 587 B.C.E., they also indirectly destroyed the unchallenged efficacy of this Iron Age theology. In subsequent decades and centuries, biblical writers such as the authors of Isaiah 40-55, Job, and Ecclesiastes, and various apocalypticists would reconsider whether moral cause and effect was an adequate explanation for human fortunes. The punishment of the Judahites seemed immeasurably greater than their sins. Second Isaiah suggested that some suffering might be
redemptive (Isaiah 52:13—53:12). Job subpoenaed God only to have the Almighty explain that the universe is exquisitely complicated and that the divine justice transcends the binary moral categories of “innocent” or “guilty.” The writer of Ecclesiastes shrugged his world-weary shoulders and concluded that a misty, vaporous atmosphere of “vanity” inhibits mortals from seeing the divine patterns. The apocalypticists, such as the author of Daniel 7–12, claimed that the very patterns that were so opaque to the author of Ecclesiastes were, to the contrary, crystal-clear. The times and seasons had been “revealed” (the meaning of the Greek term apocalypsthein) to them. The apocalypticists came up with a conspiracy theory: the reason why the Chosen People continue to suffer is because a demonic, universal network is dedicated to destroying them at every turn.

The Iron Age theology of Kings did not die. Moral cause and effect re-
mained—and remains—operative. This theology was like Newtonian physics, a viable and enduring explanation for the basic operating system, but less useful the farther one moved toward the margins where light bends, time curves, the wicked continued to flourish, and the righteous to languish. The scroll of Kings formulated its conservative, traditional Iron Age thesis so securely and persuasively that it endured long enough for other progressives to critique and question it. It phrased it eloquently enough to explain the quotidian realities, the diurnal cycles of history, where the rise and fall of bodies in motion and of souls in moral combat were still recognizably linear, predictable, and orderly. The scroll of Kings is the final grand statement of the Iron Age theology.

The Temple: Four chapters in this initial section of the scroll of Kings are devoted to Solomon’s construction of the Temple (1 Kings 5–8), a testimony to its importance as the supreme sacred
space in ancient Judahite culture. The theological symbolism of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem is crucial; the temple represented a creation story written in architecture.

The Temple had three sections. Using the terms in the NRSV of 1 Kings 6, they were (a) the vestibule, (b) the nave, and (c) the inner sanctuary. The vestibule was the forecourt, an entrance area guarded by two immense pillars, “Boaz” and “Jachin” (1 Kings 7:21). These pillars symbolically supported the dome of the sky. Close to them, also outside the structure proper, was a bronze basin filled with water, “the molten sea” (1 Kings 7:23–26). We should recall that in ancient Near Eastern creation traditions, “the sea,” Hebrew yām, often symbolized the chaos that had to be defeated or controlled in order for there to be an orderly world. So the forecourt of the Temple proclaimed in masonry and metallurgy that the Deity worshipped at this site controlled the chaotic waters
above the earth by supporting the dome of sky with sacred columns, and contained the chaotic waters below the earth within the boundaries of sacred basins. On Mount Zion, on the banks of the Edenic Gihon (cf. Genesis 2:13, 1 Kings 1:33, 38, 45), the chaotic vitality of the primeval waters was channeled, controlled, and transformed into the River of Life.

The nave of the Temple was a large enclosed limestone chamber with cedar panels on the sides and a cypress floor. The cedar panels were decorated with carvings of palm trees, flowers, and cherubim (1 Kings 6:29). Architecturally, this assemblage of carved wood and dressed stone represented nothing less than a sacred grove on a divine mountain. The nave of Solomon’s Temple was symbolically the Garden of Eden. Crossing the threshold of the Temple, its priests entered sacred time and space, the First Morning in Eden’s forest. Through appropriate rites and intermediaries, they regained a lost inti-
macy between the Creator and the community.

The way in which the nave depicted a sacred Edenic arbor has immense theological significance. Through worship at this house, the community believed that it received a dose of creation, and was renewed daily, every Sabbath, and every holiday. If we extended this ancient view to our world, then we would envision community worship as a return to the Garden—a place where the community leaves mundane time and enters the time of “as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.” We would see them joining the ancestors and all creation in a renewal of the primeval “very goodness” that God intended for the world. Our culture may have forgotten this, but it unwittingly preserves this truth in language that speaks about the Sabbath as a day for “recreation,” that is, re-creation.

The inner sanctuary of the Temple, the Holy of Holies, contained two statues. Images of cherubim—the sphinx—
like monsters that guarded the borders around sacred places in ancient mythologies—menacingly sat as divine bodyguards in this Iron Age throne room of the King of the Universe. The inner wings of these hybrid winged-lions rose toward each other. The charged stillness where these cherubs’ wings kissed, a void measured in millimeters, served as the focal point for encountering the mysterious, invisible, un-imaged Creator of the heavens and the earth.

The design of this ancient shrine broke the patterns of contemporary sacred architecture and opened a threshold to a religious world we still inhabit. For the Jerusalem priests who ventured on behalf of their community into the deepest privacy of the divine apartment in God’s very house saw nothing, and then everything. Here in the Inner Sanctum of Solomon’s Temple we approach the architectural expression of the Mosaic revelation that God is One, and that the divine identity
transcends every mortal attempt to outline its fearful symmetry in images.

**Prophetic Heroism:** The final theological contribution of Kings is its depictions of those uncompromising holy men who confronted the powers-that-be in every generation: the prophets. It is as if in every dynasty, in every era, there was always a prophetic voice to check the excesses of kings and to insist that power be wedded to justice. This is not a new theme in the Former Prophets: Samuel performed this function in Saul’s day. Nathan immortalized it in David’s court when the prophet told King David, “You are the man” who killed Uriah the Hittite (2 Samuel 12:7). For every culture that has been influenced by the ideals of biblical justice, these stories about prophets checking royal excess and standing up for the powerless remain foundational. The prophetic standard leaves no ruler above the law and no commoner below its protection.
The Content of Kings

The scroll of Kings can be divided into five sections:

1. The Template (1 Kings 1–11). The first section details the transition of the monarchy from King David to King Solomon. The latter reign, among the dozens depicted in the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah throughout 1 and 2 Kings, receives the most detailed attention of them all, most of it admiring. This could be because the historian who composed Kings remembered this tenth-century Solomonic administration as a golden age for their culture. But it is more likely that the prominence given in Kings to the Solomonic era was motivated more by prospective hopes for the future than by nostalgic retrospection. For Solomon is hardly portrayed as the ideal king: he “clings” (1 Kings 11:2) to his foreign-born wives rather than to the LORD (cf. Deuteronomy 11:22), indulging their
non-Israelite religious practices and traditions (1 Kings 11:4–8).

Solomon’s four decade reign receives a full quarter of this chronicle that spans four centuries because it serves as the template for the hoped-for renaissance of their society following the Exile. According to this template, the remnant of Israel and Judah, northern and southern tribes, would honor a single ritual center, the Temple in Jerusalem. That Temple would be reconstructed according to the Solomonic blueprint whose details are lovingly recorded 1 Kings 6–8. All subsequent kings, like Solomon, would be Davidic heirs who exemplified wisdom (Solomon’s legendary sagacity is profiled in three full chapters, 1 Kings 3–4, 10) rather than martial heroism. Royal military adventurism held no interest for this historian, who had seen enough of siege, devastation, and campaigning in his lifetime.

2. Prophetic Heroism (1 Kings 12—2 Kings 13). The next section, the
heart of the entire work, the longest and most lively section of the scroll, depicts the prophetic heroism that generation by generation kept Mosaic faith alive throughout the monarchical era.

3. Freefall in Ephraim (2 Kings 14–17). The third section leaves the narrative of the prophets to concentrate on the eddying, spiraling decline of the Northern Kingdom, whose capital Samaria fell to the Assyrian army in 722 B.C.E.

4. The Union of Prophecy and Order in Judah (2 Kings 18–23). The penultimate section of the scroll depicts the false spring of kingship in Judah under King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18–20) and King Josiah (2 Kings 22–23). During the reigns of these two admirable monarchs—interrupted by the miserable royal pair of Manasseh and Amon (2 Kings 21)—a workable synthesis of royal power and prophetic justice was achieved as Hezekiah relied on the counsel of Isaiah and Josiah on Huldah and the legacy of the Mosaic prophetic
tradition contained in the book of the Torah discovered in the Temple (2 Kings 22).

5. A Theology of Exile (2 Kings 24–25). The final section of Kings describes the end of a world, the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians, as a whimpering, drawn-out tragedy of ineffectual statecraft and as the long overdue collapse of a structure, Israelite and Judean kingship, that had been compromised from its beginning by infidelity to Mosaic instruction, that is, the Torah.

Conclusion

Kings? No, they are not the heroes of this chronicle of the dynastic era in ancient Israel and Judah. The prophets are, and it is in those sections of 1 and 2 Kings that feature accounts of the women and men who belonged to this, mainly, underground subculture of dissent that the narrative pace quickens, the quality of the storytelling rises, and
the virtues of this ancient monotheistic religious culture, whose legatees include Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, were epitomized and preserved.

The fierce advocacy of these prophets for Mosaic monotheism and covenantal restrictions on royalty and peasant alike can now be seen as foundational for free societies. The emphasis on the heroism of the prophets in the scroll of Kings democratized the ideal of justice. In ancient Near Eastern culture, the protection of the weak from the strong was everywhere the purview of the king. A just king, as Hammurabi described himself, “promote[d] the welfare of the people,…caus[ing] justice to prevail,…that the strong should not oppress the weak.” The scroll of Kings makes an extraordinary move by decoupling this ideal from the king and placing it with the counselor, the prophet, the religious intermediary. This tempering of royal power by justice, and the informal, traditional institutionalization of the prophetic office a-
mong the peoples of ancient Israel and Judah are roots of the doctrine of the separation of powers. The prophetic insistence that even the monarchical office itself be legally circumscribed by Mosaic teaching, the Torah, is a foretaste of constitutional governance.
Dr. Gregory Mobley is Professor of Christian Bible at Andover Newton Theological School in Newton, Mass. His field is Hebrew Bible and he is the author of The Return of the Chaos Monsters: The Backstories of the Bible (Eerdmans, 2012), The Empty Men: The Heroic Tradition of Ancient Israel (Anchor Bible Reference Library, 2005), Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East (Continuum, 2006), and with co-author T. J. Wray, The Birth of Satan: Tracing the Devil's Biblical Roots (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). He has also recently co-edited with J. Peace and O. Rose, My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation (Orbis, 2012). He has written many articles and essays about the Bible and is currently writing a commentary on Judges. Mobley is an ordained American Baptist minister and is active in Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Cover image from Christoph Weigel’s 1695 collection of biblical images, Biblia ectypa, courtesy of the Pitts Theology Library, Candler School of Theology, Emory University.

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