

A Guided Walk-Through the Biblical Narrative

A synopsis of Genesis 1-11

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The pinnacle of this good creation was humanity; made in his image and given the glorious task of ruling everything as his royal representatives. The description of the garden – a slice of God's order in the uncultivated world – reinforces the special vocation human beings have been given. Alongside this vocation the Lord has given them wide permission as well as a single prohibition to observe. Tempted to question God's good intentions to them they transgress the prohibition, pervert the permission, and neglect their vocation and are driven from the garden.

This is not, however, the end of God's plans or of his commitment to them. In judgment there is grace, but destructive power of sin escalates until the whole the world is destroyed. Even this doesn't wash away the problem of the human heart and soon the world returns to its rebellious ways. Given God's commitment not to destroy the world again, the question becomes, what will he do to bring about his purposes in an unfaithful world?

The answer begins with Abram...

Part 3

11. 1 Kings 12:25-33

Why this text is important to the narrative.

The establishment of the northern kingdom of Israel – by the word of the Lord – almost immediately turns away from the Lord. Jeroboam fails to trust the promises of the Lord and, out of fear that he will lose the kingdom the Lord has given him, creates an alternate worship system under the guise of worshipping the Lord. This syncretism will become a central failure of the people in the story to follow and it takes a particular form.

Syncretism is the mixing together of various beliefs into a new system. The Israelites tended to have an under-realised form of syncretism by which I mean they don't seem to fully grasp what they are doing (in this sense it is under-realised). For some reason they felt that the worship of anything or anyone else was fine as long as the Lord was still worshipped too! The prophets would regularly attack this practice, declaring that the addition of anything to the worship of the Lord was equivalent to forsaking the Lord!

The sin of Jeroboam would become a catch phrase in the rest of Kings – the proverbial sin of Jeroboam son of Nebat.

For further reading:

a. 1 Kings 15:9-24 (see 2 Chronicles 14:2-16:14). This is the story of Asa, one of the kings of Judah. He is one of good ones, but like so many of them, doesn't end well. This is made particularly clear in the account in Chronicles. The story of God's people in Kings (and Chronicles) is told through the lives of the kings. If the king is faithful, the people are. If the king is not faithful, neither are the people. This focus forms a significant foundation for the Messianic hope that develops in the story.

b. 1 Kings 16:29-33. With the reign of Ahab we reach a dark period in Israel's history. He is described as the most wicked and unfaithful of the kings of Israel (and we hear more about him than nearly any other king). There are two things that are noteworthy. First, it is under

Ahab's reign that the Lord sends Elijah (and Elisha) to confront the king and to restore the worship of the Lord which is nearly exterminated by Ahab and his wife Jezebel (see 1 Kings 19:10, 14, 18 for how bad it was). Second, Ahab may very well have been one of the most politically successful kings in Israel's history. There is evidence in extrabiblical literature of his prominence. This is a pattern that is repeated throughout Kings; political success and religious success were not necessarily the same thing!

c. 1 Kings 17:7-24. This story is referred to by Jesus in the gospels. It demonstrates that God is not restricted to Israel, but can act everywhere. It is also a reminder of the promises to Abraham that the nations would be blessed. There is also significance in the fact that it is a widow!

12. 1 Kings 18:16-39

Why this text is important to the narrative.

Just as it appeared that the worship of the Lord would be utterly abandoned in Israel, the Lord sends the prophet Elijah. He bursts onto the scene and, along with his successor, Elisha, performs more miracles than nearly anyone in Scripture not named Moses or Jesus! In fact, many of the miracles these two prophets perform have parallels with Jesus'. Many of their miracles are aimed at undermining the worship of Baal, demonstrating that the Lord is God. This is one of the most famous of them – notice that the altar to the Lord has to be repaired, and Elijah's challenge to the people – If Baal is god, follow him. If the Lord is God, follow him!

For further reading:

a. 1 Kings 22:41-50 (See 2 Chronicles 17:1-21:3). This is another of the good kings whose reign is, nonetheless, marked by alliances with those who are unfaithful (which may point to the political significance of Ahab in particular; someone who was nearly impossible to say "No" to!).

b. 2 Kings 16:1-20. This story is told three times in the Old Testament. It occurs again in 2 Chronicles 28 and Isaiah 7:1-17. It is an example of a politically astute move that is deemed unfaithful. Ahaz, under immense pressure, makes an alliance with Assyria rather than trusting the Lord. This political alliance would have brought with it expectations of religious loyalty (which is behind the altar that Ahaz has built). His action may have saved the kingdom in the short term but had devastating consequences for the nation long term as it turned their hearts to other gods.

13. 2 Kings 17:7-23

Why this text is important to the narrative.

The books of 1 & 2 Kings were written, in part, to explain why the people had experienced the disaster of the exile (people always want to know why a disaster happened). This was so much more than a political or military disaster, but a theological one as the people lost the promised land, the king, the temple, and the city of Jerusalem (even though this is about Samaria); the symbols of God's promises to them. Did they still have a relationship with God? Or was it all over? The fall of Samaria foreshadows what would happen to Judah in a few chapters.

For further reading:

a. 2 Kings 18:1-19:37. This is also told three times (2 Chronicles 32:1-24; Isaiah 36:1-37:38). A careful reading suggests that Hezekiah's faithfulness – which is praised – stands in contrast to the political disaster of the Assyrian campaign. The importance of faithfulness even in the midst of defeat (and a miraculous victory) is a critical part of the story.

b. 2 Kings 25:1-30. The fall of Jerusalem echoes the fall of Samaria. There is a word of hope in the release of Jehoiachin. In fact, 2 Chronicles is the last book in the Hebrew Scriptures, and it ends with a more significant word of hope – the exile ends and the people are allowed to return home!

It is a curiosity of the text that the seventy years in exile are almost entirely passed over. Apart from a few stories in Daniel we have almost no information about what happened in exile. All we have is the stories of return when things seem to have changed!

It is also worth observing the basis of the hope that the people had in exile. The basis of their hope was that God had been faithful to his covenant and had sent them into exile! If he had been faithful to discipline them, perhaps he would be faithful to restore – which is so much more in his wheel-house (so to speak). The people who return are marked by a much greater emphasis on being faithful to the Lord (though imperfectly).

14. Jeremiah 31:31-33

Why this text is important to the narrative.

Jeremiah ministered as a prophet in the closing decades of the southern kingdom of Judah before they went into exile. Much of his message is taken up with the judgement to come, but in this text he describes God's commitment to his purposes in Israel.

In the days to come, the heart problem of God's people will be addressed and God will write his law on their hearts; internalising it for them! This new covenant hope is referred to by Jesus when he speaks of a new covenant in his blood.

15. Ezra 1:1-11

Why this text is important to the narrative.

According to the word of the Lord, the people return to the land and are given permission to rebuild the temple of the Lord. This return was almost unbelievable (see Psalm 126). Even though they were still a province of the Persian Empire, they saw in their return, the goodness of God and his ongoing commitment to them and to his purposes in the world through them.

For further reading:

a. Ezra 9-10. While the issue of idolatry doesn't raise its head like it did in their earlier history, the people of Israel still face temptation to compromise. In this text the issue of intermarriage, a huge problem in their earlier history, is confronted by Ezra. The very fact that the people are responsive to the word of the Lord is evidence that, perhaps, they have indeed changed!