melekh melakham; melekh melakah, melekh melakah; melakah basileus, basileia basileia; it is difficult to reconstruct the beliefs and institutions surrounding the king and kingship in ancient Israel. Many of the sources about kingship are biased or incomplete, written long after the kings they purport to describe. Even defining “kingship,” and when kingship began in Israel, has become more complicated as various social-scientific models have been applied to biblical texts. It is also unclear from what perspective kingship should be considered, since different groups viewed kingship quite differently. Finally, it is unknown what extent we should view kingship in Israel as a single institution, given that it lasted several centuries and flourished in both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms.

This article will focus on the word melekh, the word typically translated as “king.” Hebrew, like other ancient languages, does not use different terms to distinguish an imperial king from a ruler of a petty city-state. By looking at texts that describe the melekh, we will sidestep the issue of when melekh meant “king” in our sense, and when Israel became a kingdom.

Israelite kingship should be understood in relation to ANE kingship, and this is where the article begins. This is followed by two reconstructions of Israelite kingship, the first based on contemporaneous extra-biblical evidence, the other on the Bible. The biblical material is complex, and is open to many interpretations and forms of organization; this material is arranged to be as comprehensive as possible.

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A. Kingship in the Ancient Near East

Kingship was the main pattern of political organization in the ANE. It was understood to be part of the basic fabric of the socio-political order, and the king was recognized as a shepherd appointed by the god(s) to help society function in a harmonious fashion. The ubiquity of kingship among Israel's neighbors is reflected in Deut 17:14, where the people are depicted as saying, "I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me" (compare 1 Sam 8:5, 20). The Sumerian King List viewed kingship as "lowered from heaven," and the Egyptians believed that the roots of kingship were primeval.

Although kingship was not understood in exactly the same way throughout the ANE, there are several fundamental features of ANE kingship. 1) The king was closely associated with the divine (see EMPEROR WORSHIP). In some civilizations he was considered divine, either in life or after death, while in others he was appointed by the gods, was part of the divinely ordered world, and was, in some cases, the adopted son of the gods. 2) Kings had special insight into justice, and thus had the responsibility to promulgate and enforce law, to establish justice, and to care for the disadvantaged. 3) Kings had special roles in the cult. Many kings boasted of rebuilding temples, and Babylonian kings, for example, were primary actors in the new year or Akitu festival. 4) The king led the army in battle. The depiction of the king as a great warrior is especially obvious in Neo-Assyrian inscriptions, which include such royal epithets as "the potent warrior, who tramples his enemies, who crushes all the adversaries." These attributes are connected: the association with the divine gives the king certain powers in the judicial and military realms, and certain responsibilities to the gods in the cultic realm.

1. Non-biblical sources on Israelite kingship

It is possible to reconstruct some information about Israelite kingship from ANE texts, as well as from a variety of non-biblical Israelite sources, including inscriptions, seals, and bullae.

Several Mesopotamian texts describe Israel being defeated and paying tribute to Assyria or Babylonia. In the earliest of these, Shalmaneser III of Assyria lists Ahab, with a large number of chariots and foot soldiers, as part of a coalition headed by Damascus and defeated in 853 BCE. Later inscriptions mention Jehu paying tribute of silver, gold, and other luxury items. The 9th cent. BCE Tell Dan inscription refers to a king of Israel, and most likely a Judean king as well, by the king of Aram-Damascus after a northern king had taken some Aramean territory (see inscription, TELL DAN). The Moabite inscription mentions "Omrni king of Israel" and his son in reference to the Moabitic recapture of Nebo and other Transjordanian cities. These sources suggest that by the 9th cent. BCE, the Northern Kingdom was ruled by powerful, wealthy kings. Later Assyrian inscriptions confirm this picture.

The inscriptions of Sennacherib of Assyria depict the Judean king Hezekiah as the head of a coalition of kings, powerful enough to have deposed and imprisoned a Philistine king, though not sufficiently strong to withstand Sennacherib, who in 701 BCE devastated the Judean countryside, though he did not conquer Jerusalem. As a result of Hezekiah's defeat, he was assessed an astronomical tribute of 30 talents of gold, 800 of silver, and many luxury items such as ivory, as well as weapons. Thus, twenty years after the defeat of northern Israel, Judah too was ruled by a king who was very rich and powerful.

This non-biblical evidence suggests that both northern Israel and Judah were ruled by kings who at least at some points controlled strong armies and extensive resources. These kings were at times confident enough to fight in alliances against the powerful Assyrians (and later the Babylonians), but with poor results—they ultimately became vassals. The Moabite and Tell Dan inscriptions also suggest that the Northern Kingdom at certain points had expansionist tendencies, as it tried to enjoy the rich resources to its north and east (see MOABITE STONE).

There are no royal Israelite inscriptions. The Siloam inscription, commemorating where two groups of tunnelers met, does not mention a king; in contrast the Bible records this as a royal building project (see 2 Kings 20:20; 1 Chr 29:2-5, 30; Isa 22:11), and such projects elsewhere in the ANE were often commemorated with inscriptions praising the king.

Close to 2,000 clay storage jars from the late 8th cent. BCE stamped lmlk (םלְק) around a two-winged or four-winged scarab beetle have been found (see LMLK SEALS). It is uncertain if lmlk there means "of/belonging to the king," but the role of these cities is uncertain. Suggestions for the use of these jars range from tax collections to jars for royal wine, though a consensus is developing that they were used by King Hezekiah's men to store rations before the Assyrian invasion of 701. They thus reflect a well-organized royal bureaucracy.

One of the 9th cent. BCE SAMARIA OSTRACA dealing with an (olive) oil delivery begins lmlk, suggesting that the northern king had some role in the distribution, ownership, or guaranteeing of oil. The general function of these very brief ostraca is debated, but they surely reflect a well-developed royal bureaucracy. The ARAD OSTRACA mention a royal decree and royal servants, indicating the existence of a bureaucracy immediately preceding the destruction of the Temple. Another inscription mentions the burial of a royal steward. Thus, the inscriptions offer few details concerning kingship.

Hundreds of seals and bullae have been either excavated or sold; for reconstructing history, it is best to consider only those that have a clear provenance.
King, Kingship

of Assyria depict a coalition of sed and impris- nantly strong. The city did not conquer defeat, he was occupied. Talents of gold, such as ivory, were significant resources. We would understand that a monarchy existed in both Israel and Judah, and would have some of the names of the kings. We would have some sense of a highly developed royal bureaucracy. We would know that the king had a significant role in war, and in paying tribute as a vassal, and therefore had access to significant resources. We would understand that the king had some role related to agriculture. This information, due to the nature of these texts, is quite circumscribed.

2. Biblical perspectives on kingship

Certain biblical texts are typically treated as central for understanding kingship: the laws of the king in Deut 17:14-20; “the ways of the king” described in 1 Sam 8:11-17; the promise of an eternal dynasty to David in 2 Sam 7:5-17; and the royal psalms. Although these are much discussed, they should not be given undue weight, as there are many other texts that describe and proscribe royal practices. Also, scholars often discuss kingship in tandem with the Zion tradition that links the choosing of Jerusalem and David. We are unsure when this tradition developed, and there are many texts that depict these two events as connected, so it is wise not to overemphasize this theological idea. The following reconstruction attempts to use a broad range of texts to understand the biblical depictions of, and attitudes toward, kingship (see ISRAEL, HISTORY OF).

3. Foreign kings

The word melekh is used of foreign rulers of all types, and many such rulers are mentioned in the Bible. Some of these are local rulers, not kings in our sense; this may support the idea that the early Israelite “kings” were petty rulers or chiefains as well. In some cases foreign kings are depicted differently than Israelite kings. Thus some details concerning the Egyptian king in the Joseph story reflect Egyptian practices, and the Assyrian officials mentioned in 2 Kgs 18:17, “the Tartan, the Rab-saris, and the Rabshakeh,” accurately reflect the Assyrian rather than Judean bureaucracy. In most cases, however, foreign kings are depicted in the same manner as Israelite kings, raising the probability that biblical authors naturally assimilated most aspects of foreign kingship to Israelite kingship.

B. Becoming King

1. Dynasties

One of the king’s sons, usually the oldest, reigned after his father. The idea that primogeniture was not automatic is clear from 1 Kgs 1:20, where Bathsheba says to David: “the eyes of all Israel are on you to tell them who shall sit on the throne of my lord the king after him.” In certain cases, the “people of the land,” perhaps a term for a group of the landed gentry, decided who would reign (see 2 Kgs 11:14). Sometimes a foreign power removed a king and appointed his successor, but in such cases in Judah the successor was part of the royal Davidic family (e.g., 2 Kgs 24:15-17). In rare cases, there was a co-regency, where the successor began to reign before his father died (e.g., 2 Kgs 15:5).

But how did new dynasties get started? Judges 8:22-23, concerning Gideon, imagines that the populace could initiate kingship. The Bible more typically speaks of prophetic legitimation. Following Yahweh’s orders, according to 1 Sam 9–10, Samuel chooses and later anoints Saul as first king; he does the same later for David (1 Sam 16:1-13). In the north, the dynasty of Jeroboam is initiated by the prophet Ahijah (1 Kgs 11:29-39), and Jehu is anointed by a disciple of Elijah (2 Kgs 9:1-13). In other cases in the Northern Kingdom, the Bible does not offer sufficient details to understand the dynamic behind one king succeeding over competitors (1 Kgs 16:8-22). As a theological document, written from a Judean perspective, Kings depicts a stable legitimate Davidic monarchy, in contrast to many illegitimate northern dynasties with fractious relations.

The one exception to the principle of male Davidic succession in Judea was the reign of Athaliah in 2 Kgs 11, who ascended the throne after her son died, and she killed the remaining royal heirs. This chapter depicts her as illegitimate, and emphasizes that the monarch must be male. (The negative manner in which Jezebel, wife of Ahab of the north is depicted, is similarly ideological.)

The story of Athaliah emphasizes the power and importance of the queen mother, the mother of the ruling king, at least in Judah. The king rises before the queen mother (1 Kgs 2:19) and her name is often mentioned in the Judean succession formulae. Some have suggested that she had important cultic roles (see esp. 1 Kings 15:13). She seems to have been more significant than the queen, though the proximity of the queen to the royal court certainly gave her some power, as illustrated especially in the stories concerning Jezebel.
2. Coronation

The coronation of the new king was a significant ritual—it represented stability of the polity. It is unclear to what extent this ritual changed over time, and differed between Judah and the north. Anointing with oil seems to have been at its core (see ANOINT), and the king could thus be called mashiakh (מַשָּׁאֵkh), “the anointed one,” or “Yahweh’s/His anointed one.” This term, which is recognizable in the English messiah, is never used of future ideal kings. Crowning the king is only attested once in the ritual descriptions (2 Kgs 11:12). See MESSIAH, JEWISH.

Coronation was typically a public event. It could include a declaration of “X has become king” (e.g., 2 Kgs 9:13) or “long live King X” (e.g., 1 Kgs 1:39). Various texts describe it as a noisy celebration, sometimes as a result of blowing a “trumpet” (better translated “a ram’s horn” [e.g., 2 Kgs 9:13]). Many of these rituals are also reflected in psalms that celebrate God’s kingship. Some scholars believe that the king agreed to follow a royal compact as part of the coronation, though there is little evidence for this. There is considerable debate about using psalms to reconstruct this ritual; it is thus uncertain, for example, if Ps 2:7, “I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you,’” was recited during the coronation. In addition to Ps 2, Ps 21, 72, and 110 have plausibly been connected to the coronation ritual.

3. The royal family and the bureaucracy

These two areas are related, since kings often appointed family members to important positions, as reflected in the title ben hammelekh (בן המלך), “the king’s son.” Obviously, the king’s male children, as potential heirs, were especially significant, as was the queen mother. The story concerning Amnon and Tamar (2 Sam 13) suggests that princesses also had an exalted role, and they were taken care of by their full-brothers until they married.

The large number of texts that outline various officials do not allow us to reconstruct the royal bureaucracy in detail. As a latecomer within the ANE to kingship, it is possible that Israel followed the practices of surrounding nations or the Canaanites in establishing their bureaucracy. We do not always understand the function implied by the Hebrew titles, and we are unsure if various officials and roles recorded in the Bible are accurate for the period they describe, or may represent later writers retrojecting backward their system of officialdom. It is therefore not possible to outline the development of various offices.

The positions of the “king’s servant” and “elder” were held by several people simultaneously. Some specific major offices include: “in charge of the palace” (better: royal house minister), “court scribe,” “recorder” (better: herald), various types of advisors, and “charge of the forced labor.” Such basic issues as the tax structure and land ownership, which were likely regulated by many functionaries, cannot be reconstructed for any period.

C. Royal Trappings

The crown and throne were the two most important objects associated with kingship. The crown was the main royal symbol, so a fallen or removed crown may represent lost kingship (e.g., Lam 5:16; Jer 13:18), yet we have no idea what it looked like. Hebrew has no special word for THRONE—the same word (קיסר) is used for throne, chair, and stool. The expression “to sit on the throne” is equivalent to reigning (1 Kgs 1:20, 27). Only Solomon’s throne is described in detail (1 Kgs 10:18-20//2 Chr 9:17-19).

Ancient Near Eastern texts and reliefs suggest that the king had special clothing, though this is not described in the Bible. Second Samuel 1:10 mentions a royal armband, a SCEPTER is referred to in several texts, and is even used metonymically to refer to kingship (e.g., Gen 49:10), and two texts mention a special pillar (2 Kgs 11:14; 23:3).

This paucity of evidence is quite disappointing. Although it is clear that a variety of clothing, jewelry, and furniture was unique to the king, we cannot determine what these items looked like, how they might have changed over time, or how they might have differed between the north and the south (see CROWN; DIADEM, DIADEMS; ROD).

D. Royal Qualities

1. Divinity

The Israelite king was no mere mortal. He has “glory” (יהוֹה בעל הָבִית, hadhar הָבִית) or “honor” (קָבֹד קָבֹד), special qualities difficult to translate, which kings and Yahweh share. Many of the royal qualities are related to divine ones. Only one text calls the king a God (Ps 45:6: “Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever”), but kings throughout the ANE were understood to have special roles vis-à-vis deities. This quasi-divine nature of the (Davidic) king is also reflected in Lam 4:20, which calls the king “the breath of our life” (compare “the lamp of Israel” in 2 Sam 21:17). In Israel, these qualities placed kings somewhere in between commoners and Yahweh. The royal house would emphasize these qualities in their propaganda to legitimate the king and his power, while those who tried to curb royal power downplayed these qualities.

Among the attributes shared by Yahweh and the king are eternal life, wisdom, wealth, and strength. These are bestowed by God, who can remove them as well, as narrated in reference to the transition between Saul and David in 1 Sam 16:13-14: “Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him [David] in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came...” See IMMORTALITY, WISDOM, WEALTH.
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In 1 Kgs 3:11-12, Yahweh commends Solomon for
not having asked for riches, indicating that wealth was
an expected royal quality. Several texts suggest that
kings had control of both the royal and the Temple
treasuries (e.g., 2 Kgs 16:8). Psalms 45:3 and 89:19
both call the king “mighty,” and the concluding notices
for many kings in Kings mention the king’s “power”
(e.g., 1 Kgs 16:27).

5. Physical perfection
In addition to these shared attributes, several kings
are depicted as exceedingly handsome (Saul in 1 Sam
9:2; 10:23; David in 16:12, 18). This partakes in the
idea that the king is perfect in all domains, and that the
king’s body has symbolic value.

B. Royal Responsibilities
Like their ANE counterparts, the Israeli kings had
responsibilities in four main spheres: military, judicial,
civic, and state building projects. In the Bible, the first
two are much more prominent than the latter two; this
balance is different in the surrounding cultures.

1. Commander-in-chief
Part of the king’s broad role of enforcing stability
in all realms included serving as commander-in-chief,
leading his people’s army in war. Though his military
responsibility could sometimes be delegated, at least
in the initial stages of the battle (see 2 Sam 11:1), the
king often participated personally, and the Bible and
ANÉ records recall kings dying in battle (see, e.g.,
2 Kgs 23:29).

 Scholars once believed that kingship developed in
Israel as a result of the military pressure of the Philis-
tines and the need for a single leader to face them (see
1 Sam 8:20; 14:52), though most are now skeptical of
this as the single or primary reason for the rise of the
monarchy. Since the king led his people into battle,
wars could be depicted as between kings, as in 2 Kgs
16:5: “Then King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of
Remalah of Israel came up to wage war on Jerusalem;
they besieged Ahaz but could not conquer him.” The
responsibility of the king as commander-in-chief is con-
ected to his need to be strong, as outlined above.

Some texts suggest that the king received this
ability directly from Yahweh; it is unclear how wide-
spread this belief was. For example, in the royal psalm,
2 Sam 22:48 (//Ps 18:48-49), the royal speaker praises
the God who...brought down peoples under me.”
Psalms such as 144:1, 10, “Blessed be the Lord, my
rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers
for battle...the one who gives victory to kings, who
rescues his servant David,” should also be connected
to this ideology that Yahweh is the source of the
king’s power as military leader. This royal quality is so
important that it is even mentioned in Ps 45:5, a psalm
celebrating a royal wedding.

2. Judicial responsibilities
The idea that the king was central to a well-run
society is expressed in Judg 17:6 and 21:25: "In those
days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what
was right in their own eyes.” With no king, crimes of
all sorts are rampant. However, exactly what the king’s
role in the judicial system was at different periods is
hard to reconstruct. Nowhere does the Torah suggest
that the king had any such responsibilities. Yet, in plot-
ning his rebellion, Absalom says, according to 2 Sam
15:4: “If only I were judge in the land! Then all who
had a suit or cause might come to me, and I would give
them justice,” suggesting some sort of royal judicial
role. The idea sometimes implied that the king could
decide all cases (1 Kgs 3:16-27) is impossible from a
logistical standpoint; perhaps it represents the belief
that the king was ultimately responsible for justice in
the land. There is some evidence that the king was
involved as a court of appeals, and in certain property
cases. To the extent that Moses is depicted in the Torah
as Israel’s king, the statement that he judges only cases
that are too difficult for lesser judges (Exod 18:26; Deut
1:17) may be instructive.

In 2 Chr 19:4-11, King Jehoshaphat is depicted as
(re)structuring the judicial system, but most believe
this account to be fictional. Psalm 122:5 expresses the
royal responsibilities of the king: “For there [in Jeru-
salem] the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones
of the house of David,” and in a variety of prophetic
texts kings who fulfill their judicial responsibilities,
especially concerning the lower classes, are applauded
Although this text is polemical, it likely reflects some reality concerning royal cultic activities. Some scholars even suggest that the Israelite king, like his Mesopotamian counterpart, played a major role in the annual new year festival (see FEASTS AND FASTS).

Some later kings are also given significant cultic roles. Two Judean kings, Jehoash and Josiah, initiate Temple repairs (2 Kgs 12; 22); they were clearly seen as royal patrons of the Temple. Kings had access to the Temple treasury, and could use those funds to pay their overlords (e.g., 1 Kgs 15:18).

Various understandings of how the royal psalms were recited suggest that the king played an even larger role in the cult. This significant function is often downplayed because it is absent in the Torah, where, according to the Priestly source, priests were the main officiants, a role played by Levitical priests in Deuteronomy. In 2 Chr 26:1-21, King Uzziah is punished for offering incense in the Temple, usurping a priestly role; the Chronicler also revises the tradition that David's sons served as priests (1 Chr 18:17). But the rest of the Bible, including the depiction of the Temple and palace as proximate buildings, suggests that kings often had cultic roles that connected them to Yahweh, to whom they were subservient.

G. State Building Projects

The biblical king is the master builder, who builds palaces (e.g., 1 Kgs 7:22-39), temples (e.g., 1 Kgs 6), and even whole cities (e.g., 1 Kgs 12:25; 2 Kgs 14:22). It is of course unlikely that the king was personally involved in all aspects of such projects, but they are attributed to him because he offered the resources for them, and constructed them for the glory of his kingship. Building projects are also attributed symbolically to the king in Mesopotamia. Also, as in Mesopotamia, some northern kings moved their capitals, affording them opportunities to have their "own" city with an "original" palace, emphasizing their royal power and wealth.

Unfortunately, there are no extant descriptions of royal building projects beyond those of Solomonic, which used a wide variety of imported luxury items for construction (see TEMPLE OF SOLOMON; TEMPLE, JERUSALEM). First Kings 10:21 sums up their lavishness: "All King Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the House of the Forest of Lebanon were of pure gold; none were of silver—it was not considered as anything in the days of Solomon." Here too, as in the other areas of royal responsibilities, Solomon is depicted as having divine abilities (1 Kgs 5:12).

H. Misgivings about Kingship

Although many passages assume that kingship is a central and crucial Israelite institution, others criticize kingship. It is difficult to judge what the majority opinion was at different time periods, but looking at the issue overall, it is tempting to question a monarchy's role and its position in society.
over time, it is clear that there was ambivalence at different times, by different groups, for different reasons.

Much of this ambivalence is expressed in 1 Samuel, which outlines the establishment of the monarchy. The number of sources and date of this material is disputed, and it should not be seen as a straightforward history of early 10th century BCE attitudes, reflecting what happened with a real king named Saul.

Most of 1 Sam 8–12 reflects a negative attitude toward the monarchy, but it might be expressing a more narrow anti-Saul sentiment under the guise of anti-monarchical sentiment. There the request for a king comes from the people, rather than from Yahweh or a prophet, and the text notes that “the thing displeased Samuel” (1 Sam 8:6). Yahweh’s answer, complaining that the request reflects rejection of Yahweh as king (v. 7; compare 10:19), is confusing—there need not be competition between Yahweh as king and a human king; many ANE civilizations had both divine kings and human kings. Samuel continues by reciting all the disadvantages of kingship—the king will tax all aspects of production, and will use corvée labor (v 8:11–17). Exactly which king or period this long list of royal obligations represents is unknown.

First Samuel 12:19 characterizes asking for a king in terms of having “added to all our sins,” and earlier in the chapter, the people are threatened with agricultural disaster to punish their request. These chapters thus reflect two mutually reinforcing arguments against kingship: it reflects a rejection of Yahweh as king, and by nature, kings abuse their subjects (see KING, GOD AS; THEOCRACY).

Misgivings about kingship appear elsewhere as well. The anonymous prophet Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 40–55), unlike the other prophets of consolation, never describes a future ideal Davidic king. This cannot be accidental, for he calls Cyrus of Persia Yahweh’s “anointed” (45:1), and in 55:3–4 reinterprets the Davidic covenant as applying to all Israel. Also, in these chapters Yahweh is often depicted as a king coming directly to the people’s aid. These factors suggest that this prophet of the Babylonian exile had given up on the value of human kingship.

The Torah also has misgivings about kingship, which is mentioned in only one of the law collections, in Deut 17:14–20. This unit likely is composite, but all of its parts limit the power of the king, who may not accumulate symbols of power, such as wealth, resources, or wives (vv. 16–17), who is subservient to the Levitical priests (v. 18), and who (v. 20) must not engage in behavior that would result in “exalting himself above other members of the community.” He is a king in name only. In Priestly material, the king is never mentioned. Some believe that (as in Ezekiel) the Priestly nasi’ (נָשִּׁי) or “ruler” stands in for the melekh or king; if so, it is noteworthy that the nasi’ plays a very minor role and is hardly royal in stature.

These misgivings in Samuel, Deutero-Isaiah, the Torah, and elsewhere contrast very sharply with the promise given to David in 2 Sam 7:14–16, which is not at all ambivalent, and instead contains extremely strong, unconditional language concerning David’s successor(s):

I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

In some places, similar language is used, but the promise is conditional (e.g., 1 Kgs 9:4–5). It is unclear which of these ideas developed first. Thus it is important to remember the full range of expression concerning kingship, from those who rejected it to those who believed it was a divinely ordained institution, and even those who believed that the king partook in Yahweh’s divinity.

I. The End and the Idealization of Kingship

Kingship came to an end in 586 BCE, with the Babylonian capture of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple. Second Kings 25:7 and its parallels suggest that Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, was blinded, and his children were killed; eleven years earlier, King Jehoiachin had been exiled to Babylon. An attempt by Ishmael “of the royal family” to resurrect the Davidic monarchy failed (2 Kgs 25:25). The very end of 2 Kings records the release of King Jehoiachin from prison in Babylon; some see this notice as reflecting the author’s hope that the Davidic dynasty would be restored.

It is unclear if there was an attempt to reestablish the Davidic monarchy after the return from exile, typically dated to 538 BCE. Sheshbazzar, of Davidic descent, was one of the leaders of the return, and Zerubbabel, his relative, followed him. They are both, however, called “governor” rather than “king”; it is unlikely that the Persian government would have tolerated a king of the Persian province of Yehud. Some historians, based on little evidence, posit an unsuccessful attempt to reestablish a Davidic monarchy in this period. Expectations that the monarchy would be restored are reflected in the early postexilic prophets Haggai and Zechariah (see esp. Hag 2:23; Zech 6:9–15). Our sources for the period are very minimal, and it is impossible to evaluate the extent to which hopes or attempts of reestablishing the Davidic dynasty continued.

Given the problems in dating biblical sources, it is also difficult to know if, instead of trying to restore the monarchy, new ideas developed concerning a future
ideal Davidic king. Certainly the idea of a Messiah developed already in the preexilic period, perhaps as a frustrated reaction to the shortcomings of most “real” Davidic kings; messianism expresses the hope that a fair, just, and powerful king will reign instead of the corrupt king (see MESSIAH, JEWISH).

Kingship is the central political institution in the Bible. Kings are recognized already in Genesis, and the material in Judges is structured to show why kingship is necessary, implying that only a king can maintain social order. Two long books, Samuel and Kings, contain a wide variety of stories ranging from the founding to the ideal Davidic king. Certainly the idea of a Messiah with new beliefs concerning messianism, anticipating Yahweh as king, and further developed these notions.

When most people think of biblical kings, they contemplate the ideal future Davidic king or Messiah. Yet biblical kings were people who had tremendous authority in the political structure. Some texts suggest a type of system of “checks and balances,” where royal power intersected with priestly and prophetic power, and of course was checked, as needed, by Yahweh. It is difficult to know how in fact this was carried out, especially given the ideology that existed among some that the king was in some sense divine.

J. Second Temple Period Kingship

For discussion of kingship in the Second Temple period, including the NT, see ANTIOCHUS; DAVID IN THE NT; GOVERNMENT, NT; HASMONEANS; HEROD, FAMILY; KING OF THE JEWS; KINGDOM OF GOD, KINGDOM OF HEAVEN; ROMAN EMPIRE; SELUCID EMPIRE; SON OF DAVID.