

CHAPTER 9

Kings of Israel and Judah

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

With the establishment of two kingdoms, the Jewish people were faced with political instability. Continually, both Israel and Judah were confronted by foreign adversaries. During this period, external sources such as the Black Obelisk provided supplementary information about the history of the Hebrew people. Such concrete evidence provides support for the historicity of the Biblical narrative. Yet, this material is fragmentary and often ambiguous. Hence, the question remains whether the Bible should be viewed as an accurate record of ancient Israelite civilization. Traditionally Jews have viewed Scripture as providing a true account of the history of the nation. Yet, modern Biblical scholarship raises serious questions about this claim. Such questioning has profound implications for the Jewish faith. If the historicity of the Hebrew Bible is called into question, what is the authority for Jewish claims about God and his demands?

The Bible records that during the early history of the nation idolatrous practices were rampant. Repeatedly the royal household was rebuked for its failure to follow the covenant. In 1 Kings the prophet Elijah is depicted as a fierce critic of the king as well as a defender of monotheism. In 1 Kings 18 his conflict with the prophets of Baal and Asherah is described in detail – after God sent fire to ignite his offering, Elijah declared that the God of Israel is Lord. What do you make of this account? If such an event actually took place, would this constitute proof of God’s existence? If not, could anything? As we will see, in the Middle Ages Jewish philosophers such as Moses Maimonides discussed this issue (see Chapters 31–33). But, the concept of proofs for God’s existence is complex, and you will want to think about this topic.

THINGS TO DO

- Go to Google.com. Click on images. Type in ‘Elijah Baal’. Have a look at the images depicting Elijah’s confrontation with the prophets of Baal and Asherah in 1 Kings.
- Stay in Google. Click on images. Have a look at books dealing with the kings of Judah and Israel.
- Continue in Google. If you type in ‘Black Obelisk’, you should find pictures of it.
- In Google type in ‘Black Obelisk’. Here you will find websites about the Black Obelisk and early Israelite history such as www.kchanson.com/ANCDOCS/meso/obelisk.html.
- Stay in Google. Click on images: type in ‘Shalmaneser’. Have a look at the depictions of Shalmaneser. Now type in ‘Adad Nirari’ for images of Shalmaneser’s grandson who forced Israel to pay tribute to Assyria.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Stage a debate about Elijah’s conflict with the prophets of Baal. Ask one group to defend the traditional claim that Elijah’s actions proved that God exists; the other group should argue against such a view. Reassemble the group and have a general discussion about proofs for the existence of God. You may want to have a look at the ways in which this topic has been discussed by both Jewish and non-Jewish theologians. Go to Google.com for information.

- Divide your class into small groups. Read out the inscription on the Black Obelisk. (See Google for information.) Ask the groups to discuss the implications of this archaeological discovery concerning the historicity of the Bible.
- Project the map of Israel and Judah on an overhead projector so that students will have a grasp of the geographical location of the two kingdoms.