

Lesson 11: Chronology and the Framework Narrative in Kings

Goals:

1. All students will understand that the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Judah existed simultaneously; that the Kingdom of Israel was ruled by a changing succession of dynasties, in which there was no centralization of worship; that the Kingdom of Judah was continuously ruled by descendants of David and Shelomo in which sporadic attempts were made to centralize worship.
2. All students will recognize that there is a standard “framework” which Sefer Melakhim uses to tell the stories of the kings of Israel and Judah, and that this framework is used for each king, regardless of how long he ruled.
3. All students will understand that Tanakh tries to correlate the years of the kings of Israel with those of Judah, but that there exist problems in correlating the years of the kings of Judah to the years of the kings of Israel.
4. Brighter students will understand the precise difficulties in correlating the years of the kings of Israel with those of the kings of Judah and the asynchronisms in the period between Yarov’am and the House of Omri.
5. All students will appreciate the inherent instability of the dynasties in the kingdom of Israel, and reflect on the peculiar nature of “kingship” in the absence of a dynasty.

Part 1: Overview of the Framework Narrative and the Chronology Problem

It is preferable to allow students to explore the text of Melakhim (from Melakhim Alef chapter 14 and on) so as to identify the framework pattern that recurs and uncover the chronological difficulties on their own. Therefore, this lesson should be preceded by the homework assignment found in Handout 1. This is a major assignment, representing at least 4 hours of work, and should count for a substantial portion of the student’s grade. It should be assigned as soon as lesson 9 is partially completed, because the students need basic information about the split in the kingdom. Do not wait to complete lesson 10, because the students will need time to finish the work, and the teacher will need time grade it. (There is no homework in lesson 10, so this works well.) If necessary, it is possible to teach lesson 12 before lesson 11 and thus give extra time for completing the assignment. Students should be encouraged to do the reading for the assignment in Hebrew, but there is no great loss (other than to their skill practice) if they do so in English.

The teacher will have to spend a few minutes of class time introducing the assignment. Explain the three parts, and that each part is based on the information gleaned in the previous part.

The only confusing element in the part ALEF is that there are two Yehorams, and the students need to distinguish between them. They also need to make sure to read the whole paragraph

about each king, and not to write down any old name that's mentioned in the paragraph, because each king's reign is synchronised with that of another king.

Part BET is self-explanatory, students who are motivated to complete this part more fully deserve higher grades.

Part GIMEL requires that students use the information from part BET to figure out the length of each king's reign in relation to other kings and create a comparative chart. For example: in what year of which king of Judah did Elah ben Baasha begin to rule over Israel? How long did he reign (illustrate with an arrow) and in what year of which king of Judah did his successor begin? Do the numbers match up? (They don't.) I recommend using lines and arrows to indicate the relative chronologies. For weaker students, who are not up to challenges, this part of the lesson is too difficult. The teacher should consider running some sort of supportive havruta session to complete this part of the lesson together with the weaker students.

The teacher should find some way to ensure that this assignment (after it is checked and handed back) is kept in a folder (digital or paper), easily accessible to students in subsequent lessons, so that they can refer back to it frequently.

The frontal teaching in this lesson should be done AFTER the students have completed the assignment, and after the teacher has reviewed it and handed it back. The frontal teaching focuses on two issues:

- a. the religious evaluations of the kings
- b. the chronological challenges.

Part 2: The Standard Framework and the Religious Evaluations of the Kings

Ask the students to look at Part BET of the assignment, and ask them to point out similarities and differences among the descriptions of the kings of Judah first, and then among the kings of Israel. By noting how similar each description is, students should realize that the prophet who put together Sefer Melakhim intentionally standardized the descriptions, and wrote it in a single style. This means that he likely lived towards the end of the period of Sefer Melakhim and writes by using written records from earlier periods. As he looks back through the period of the book, he realizes that the major failing of all of the kings he discusses is their failure to centralize sacrifice in the Temple. As a result of this, for reasons we discussed earlier, the Israelites gradually begin to worship other gods.

The teacher should ask students which sins are highlighted in Sefer Melakhim. Students should realize that the religious evaluation in the standard framework mentions only the sins of failure to centralize worship and idolatry, and almost completely ignores any other sins. Open a discussion of why this might be so, and allow students to appreciate that recognizing God as sovereign is a necessary step before any other mitzvot. The author of Sefer Melakhim thus expresses a prioritization of mitzvot in his narrative.

Part 3: Dealing with Asynchronism

The rest of the present lesson focuses on the chronological challenges, emerging from Part GIMEL of the assignment. It deals with lack of synchronisms and what we learn from this.

There is a wide variety of academic literature dealing with the chronology of the kings of Judah. A very detailed introduction is contained in Edwin R. Thiele's *The Mysterious Numbers of the Ancient Hebrew Kings*, to which Christine Tetley of New Zealand has recently responded in a full-length book. An easier place to begin is with the Anchor Bible Commentary on Kings by Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor (2 volumes), which addresses some of the similar problems but proposes somewhat different solutions.

In an attempt to make the lesson manageable, the frontal lesson does not deal with the correlations to the reigns of each of the kings, but only with the total length of each king. The teacher needs to carefully read and assimilate the following.

The key point is Melakhim Bet, in chapter 3 verse 1, which states that Yehoram of Israel began to rule in the 18th year of Yehoshafat of Judah. This means that we have two key "synchronisms" or "match-up points." One is the point when the split of the kingdom began, i.e. when Rehav'am and Yarov'am began to rule, and the second is the 18th year of Yehoshafat of Yehuda, when Yehoram of Israel began to rule. The sum of all the years of the kings of Israel between the beginning of Yarov'am and the beginning of Yehoram of Israel must equal the sum of all the years of all the kings of Judah between the beginning of Rehav'am and the 18th year of Yehoshafat.

Problem is, the sums don't match up. There are seven extra years in Israel, as you see from slide 2.

How can the text make sense? The solution Thiele elaborates (which Radak alludes to in his commentary on I Kings 16:23) is that the years of the kings of Israel are not necessarily complete years. Give the students the following example. Let's assume that Yarov'am died on the last day of Shevat. His son, Nadav, began to reign on the first day of Adar. Let's then assume that Baasha killed Nadav on the first day of Iyyar. How long did Nadav actually reign? 2 months. But how long does Melakhim Alef 15:25 assign to Nadav? 2 years. Why?

The teacher can explain to the students that it is important in a kingdom to know what year of the king we are currently in, since any written contracts are dated by the royal year (laws are still dated by the royal year in Canada, Britain, and other countries over which HM The Queen reigns). Divide the class into two and declare half the class the kingdom of Israel, and the other half the kingdom of Judah.

As soon as Nadav begins to rule, the people of Israel consider this year 1 of Nadav, and when the 1st of Nisan arrives, then year 2 of Nadav begins.

Let's give an example – on the first day of Adar when Nadav begins to reign, student A who lives in the kingdom of Israel, wants to sell his cow to student B, who also lives in the kingdom of Israel. They write a contract that says “on the first of Adar in year 1 of Nadav king of Israel student A sold a white cow with a black patch on its back to student B for 5 shekel of silver.” Students C and D sign as witnesses. (We actually have such contracts, although not from this period in Israel; presumably they wrote on parchment or papyrus which has not been preserved.) The date on the contract is extremely important. Here's why: Student B then turns around and sells the cow to student E (also from Israel), and also has a contract which says “on the last day of Nisan, in year 2 of Nadav king of Israel, student B sold a white cow with a black patch on its back to student E for shekel of silver,” with witnesses. A year passes, and student B, who is a crook for purposes of this story, takes his contract and comes to court to claim that the cow he sold to student E is actually his. Student E needs to be able to show that the contract student B has is old and that the contract student E has is newer. (If students are sensitive, then the teacher should act as student B.)

So two years are attributed to Nadav even though he only reigned for 2 months. That's how they counted years in Israel.

However, it seems that in Judah, they used a different system. Let's say that Rehav'am died on the last day of Tevet. Aviyam begins to rule on the first day of Shevat. Student F buys a horse on the second of Shevat. How will he write his contract? It appears that he would write “On the second of Shevat in the BEGINNING OF THE REIGN of Aviyam king of Judah (ראשית מלכותו), a phrase that appears in Yirmiyahu 26:1 and elsewhere). Then, when the first of Nisan arrived, they would begin counting YEAR ONE of Aviyam of Judah. The next time the first of Nisan arrived, they would count YEAR TWO of Aviyam, and so on.

Thus, the kings of Judah DO NOT count part years as years of a king, but the kings of Israel do count part years. (This is the key point that even the weakest student needs to get. Not all students necessarily need to understand the horses and cows, only those who plan to go to business school...)

As a result, the kings of Israel who reign two years might have reigned 60 days, or 180 days, or 366 days.... In order for the numbers to work, most of these kings did not reign for the full number of years Sefer Melakhim assigns to them, but only during that number of “regal years,” or “counted years.”

Part 4: Instability in Israel

The teacher should call students attention to the fact that many of the kings in the kingdom of Israel reigned for “2 years” (as seen in slide 2). Two is a popular number. Why?

Ask: What else do these kings have in common, besides reigning for two years?

Students should realize that Nadav ben Yarov'am and Elah ben Ba'asha are both the sons of the founders of their dynasties and the last king of that dynasty. Neither has a very long reign, and

their reigns end in revolution. In other words, the people of the kingdom of Israel seem not to recognize the dynastic principle. They accept Yarov'am because he is a good leader, but don't bear allegiance to his son, just because he is the son of the "great leader." Similarly, they accept Ba'asha, who destroys the house of Yarov'am, but don't bear allegiance to his son.

A more realistic portrayal of the kings of the Kingdom of Israel might exclude such short reigning kings as Nadav ben Yarov'am and Elah ben Ba'asha and Zimri, and recognize that the kingdom goes through two "great leaders" before Omri and Ahab establish a sort of dynasty, one that lasts 60 years, and leads to another dynasty (of Yehu) which lasts about 90 years.

Contrast this with the stability of Judah under a single dynasty.