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First and Second Kings

INTERPRETATION

A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching

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A BIBLE COMMENTARY FOR TEACHING AND PREACHING

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First and Second Kings

Richard D. Nelson

INTERPRETATION

*A Bible Commentary
for Teaching and Preaching*



John Knox Press
LOUISVILLE

Author's translation of Scripture is based on the Hebrew text of Kings used by the Revised Standard Version.

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SERIES PREFACE

This series of commentaries offers an interpretation of the books of the Bible. It is designed to meet the need of students, teachers, ministers, and priests for a contemporary expository commentary. These volumes will not replace the historical critical commentary or homiletical aids to preaching. The purpose of this series is rather to provide a third kind of resource, a commentary which presents the integrated result of historical and theological work with the biblical text.

An interpretation in the full sense of the term involves a text, an interpreter, and someone for whom the interpretation is made. Here, the text is what stands written in the Bible in its full identity as literature from the time of "the prophets and apostles," the literature which is read to inform, inspire, and guide the life of faith. The interpreters are scholars who seek to create an interpretation which is both faithful to the text and useful to the church. The series is written for those who teach, preach, and study the Bible in the community of faith.

The comment generally takes the form of expository essays. It is planned and written in the light of the needs and questions which arise in the use of the Bible as Holy Scripture. The insights and results of contemporary scholarly research are used for the sake of the exposition. The commentators write as exegetes and theologians. The task which they undertake is both to deal with what the texts say and to discern their meaning for faith and life. The exposition is the unified work of one interpreter.

The text on which the comment is based is the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. The general availability of this translation makes the printing of a translation unnecessary and saves the space for comment. The text is divided into sections appropriate to the particular book; comment deals with passages as a whole, rather than proceeding word by word, or verse by verse.

Writers have planned their volumes in light of the requirements set by the exposition of the book assigned to them. Biblical books differ in character, content, and arrangement. They also differ in the way they have been and are used in the liturgy,

thought, and devotion of the church. The distinctiveness and use of particular books have been taken into account in decisions about the approach, emphasis, and use of space in the commentaries. The goal has been to allow writers to develop the format which provides for the best presentation of their interpretation.

The result, writers and editors hope, is a commentary which both explains and applies, an interpretation which deals with both the meaning and the significance of biblical texts. Each commentary reflects, of course, the writer's own approach and perception of the church and world. It could and should not be otherwise. Every interpretation of any kind is individual in that sense; it is one reading of the text. But all who work at the interpretation of Scripture in the church need the help and stimulation of a colleague's reading and understanding of the text. If these volumes serve and encourage interpretation in that way, their preparation and publication will realize their purpose.

THE EDITORS

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Abbreviations Used in Citations

ANET Ancient Near Eastern Texts

Ant Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews

AV Authorized Version

CBQ Catholic Biblical Quarterly

HUCA Hebrew Union College Annual

Interp Interpretation

JB Jerusalem Bible

JBL Journal of Biblical Literature

JSOT Journal for the Study of the Old Testament

LXX Septuagint, Greek version of the Old Testament

MT Masoretic text, the Hebrew Old Testament

NEB New English Bible

NIV New International Version

RSV Revised Standard Version

TEV Today's English Version of the Holy Bible

VT Vetus Testamentum

INTRODUCTION

Reading the Book of Kings Today

The Book of Kings is about the past. It is history, a word which to us is almost synonymous with "irrelevant." "History is a bucket of ashes," wrote Carl Sandburg, and many modern readers of First and Second Kings might be tempted to agree. At first glance Kings seems to be nothing but history, the record of rulers long dead and battles long forgotten. Read with the critical eye of the sober historian, Kings provides useful information about Israel and Judah in the monarchical period. Yet the relevance of such matters for the contemporary Christian is hardly obvious.

This problem has become even more acute since the passing of the "history of salvation" school of Old Testament theology. There was once something of a consensus that the historical books testify to a series of "mighty acts of God" to which the preacher or theologian might point as earlier examples of God's actions that culminated in the Christ event. This consensus has dissolved under the pressure of increasing historical skepticism, coupled with a tendency to read the historical books more and more as theological literature rather than as sources for history.

The history recorded in Kings no longer has any direct impact on us. This observation goes deeper than the obvious fact that we are not Jews of the sixth century B.C.E. A more fundamental problem is that Kings no longer meets our modern standards for history writing. The narrative of Kings is "history like" in that it has a chronological framework, the individual stories are structured into a unitary whole, and it is a fairly reliable source for historical evidence. Yet there is no critical evaluation of the sources from which the narratives are drawn, something even Herodotus offered. Large portions of the narrative can no longer be considered "actual history" by any modern definition. There are legends, miracle stories, folktales, and fictional constructions. Kings draws moral lessons from events,

a concern far removed from that of modern history writing. Most fundamentally, causation for events in Kings shifts from human to divine and back again without any embarrassment. Some awareness of psychological (I Kings 1:6), social (12:4), or geo-political (II Kings 17:4) causation in history is present; but the primary causative agent in Kings is God and God's offended sense of what is right. We have not written serious history from that perspective since the Renaissance.

Instead, it may prove more fruitful for us to read Kings as a piece of theological literature which happens to be in the form of history writing. Kings is not just history; it is "preached history." It has a kerygmatic intent. It was written to transform the beliefs of its first readers, to get them to re-evaluate their identity before God. To do so, Kings takes the form of history writing, providing information about past events and a framework for their interpretation. However, Kings is not really focused on the past but upon the situation of its original audience. It was designed to change their inner orientation to God, who (it claims) had turned against the people and undone the exodus by sending them back into exile.

Whether or not Kings makes sense to us or seems relevant to us as history, it remains a powerful *theological* narrative. As theological narrative it finds its relevance in the person of God. The Christian church confesses that the God of Kings is the very God the church worships, the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Read from a theocentric perspective, Kings offers us insight and perspective on the nature of God, as Jesus himself recognized (Luke 4:24-27). When read from an anthropocentric perspective, as theological *narrative*, its very nature as story fills Kings with human interest. Readers find themselves moved and touched by the art of fine story-telling. Once again, the relationship between humanity and its God is explored and exposed.

What to Expect from This Commentary

The reader will find this commentary different from other commentaries on Kings in being less concerned with it as a historical document and more concerned with it as theological literature. The focus is on the Book of Kings itself, not the history behind it. Reported events are treated more as "plot" than as "history." This commentary treats Kings as a piece of theological literature which happens to be historiography (his-

tory writing). The goal of the commentary is to open up Kings for the preaching and teaching of the Christian church. This commentary concentrates on the literary impact, the "meaning effect," that the text of Kings has on its modern readers and tries to trace the theological trajectories which result from this impact. It focuses on Kings as a canonical whole rather than as a collection of earlier materials or as the last portion of the Deuteronomistic History. The final exilic shape of Kings and its exilic audience is the focus, rather than any earlier stage in the book's literary history. For practical reasons, the Hebrew text of Kings used by the Revised Standard Version is the object of study (with occasional exceptions). References are made to the verse and chapter divisions of the English Bible.

This commentary does not provide pat answers or attempt to dictate what the text "means." Instead it intends to draw the reader into an intimate engagement with the text itself. Meaning will grow out of the effect the text has on the reader after such an encounter has taken place. This commentary intends to facilitate this process, not short-circuit it or replace it. It is designed to be a lens through which the text can be read more closely, highlighting and magnifying certain aspects, but remaining essentially transparent. It provides readers with a map or guidebook for their own journey through Kings, hoping to open up a more aware and informed experience with the text. This commentary will start the process of engagement. The rest is up to the reader!

For this reason, the bulk of this commentary is devoted to an explanation of how the Book of Kings functions as literature. How does the book have the effect it has on us? How do plot and character interact with the book's theological concern? What factors in the narrative structure are not obvious at first reading but show themselves when the text is read more closely and deliberately? Near the end of each section, the commentary explores some of the difficulties and problems which may arise when that portion of Kings is used as Scripture within the church today. It also suggests some directions for the use of that text in preaching and teaching, drawing out connections between its original purpose and the characteristic situations in which members of the Christian community find themselves. These remain, however, only suggestions and hints. They are not a substitute for the reader's own close encounter with the text.

The Book of Kings once constituted the final segment of the Deuteronomistic History, a long historiographic work which included Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and Samuel as well. For an introduction to this literary complex, the reader is directed to the books by Fretheim, Mayes, and Noth in the Bibliography.

Kings was considered to be a single book in the Hebrew canon. It was not divided into two books until the advent of printed Hebrew Bibles. In this commentary we shall follow this canonical tradition and read Kings as a single, self-contained whole. There are several excellent commentaries in English that deal with Kings from the traditional perspectives of historical criticism. The reader is directed to those listed in the Bibliography for more extensive discussions of such matters than can be provided here. Reading the excellent introduction to the commentary by G. Jones is probably the best preparation for exegetical work in Kings. For form-critical matters, the reader should consult B. Long's contribution to the *FORMS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT LITERATURE* series (Vols. 9 and 10).

The Original Audience

Kings took its final shape in the early years of the Babylonian exile. The last event within the horizon of Kings is the death of Jehoiachin, the last king of Judah. This probably took place during the reign of the Babylonian king Nabonidus (555-539 B.C.E.) or one of his immediate predecessors. Although Kings is often thought to have been composed in Palestine, the ease of communication among the Jewish communities of this period (Jer. 44:1; Ezek. 33:21) should lead us to consider all exilic Jews as the intended audience, whether they lived in Judah, Babylonia, or Egypt.

Those who remained in Palestine faced difficult times. Archaeology testifies to extensive destruction and serious depopulation in Judah. Territory in south Judah was being absorbed by encroaching Edomites. The temple was a ruin (Lam. 1:10; 2:7), although Yahweh worship of a sort continued on the site (Jer. 41:5). There was serious hunger, at least in the early years (Lam. 1:11, 19; 2:19b, 20; 4:4, 10). Those with control of stored provisions gained important influence (Jer. 41:8). The established social classes were upset (Lam. 4:5; 5:8, 12). The peasants apparently were employed as labor gangs on Babylonian-sponsored agricultural projects, and there was at least some foreign control of the land and its resources (II Kings 25:12; Lam. 5:2, 4).

At least in the early period, political unrest continued, as witnessed by the assassination of Gedaliah and the third deportation of 582 B.C.E. (Jer. 40:741:18; 52:30).

Those exiled to Babylon were first put into agricultural internment settlements (Ezek. 3:15) where they could build houses and farm (Jer. 29:56). In the scramble for limited resources, leaders tended to protect their own interests at the expense of the common folk (Ezek. 34:110). Nevertheless, the Babylonian exiles seem to have had a reasonable amount of freedom and to have enjoyed relative prosperity. At a later period, the Jews of Babylonia would begin to enter the world of commerce and a few of them would grow rich. To protect their national identity, the exiles began to emphasize practices such as Sabbath-keeping and circumcision, which set them off from their pagan neighbors.

Babylon was not a stable empire. A period of rapid turnover on the throne was followed by the accession of the religious visionary Nabonidus, devotee of the moon god Sin. Resented by loyal worshipers of the national god Marduk, Nabonidus was to become a prototype of the dangerous, mad, heretical king in Mesopotamian literature (ANET pp. 31216). He provides an intriguing parallel to the villains of the Book of Kings, such as Jeroboam and Manasseh. This was a period marked by antiquarian interests and religious unrest. Cyrus was already casting his shadow on Babylon's future as early as 550 B.C.E.

A third important community lived in Egypt. Under Amasis (568526 B.C.E.), Egypt was a cosmopolitan melange of native Egyptians and Greek mercenaries and merchants. Herodotus, in his gossipy presentation of this period (II, 17282), speaks of great material prosperity. Jews had already come to Egypt as mercenaries even before the exile. We know of exiles settled in Migdol, Tahpanhes, Memphis, and upper Egypt (Jer. 44:1). The Elephantine Jewish mercenary colony was probably founded under Amasis or perhaps earlier.

The books of Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Ezekiel give us insight into the theological opinions of the original audience of Kings. There was a general feeling of depression and disorientation. Many railed at God as unfair: "The way of the Lord is not just . . ." (Ezek. 18:25), they complained. Our ancestors sinned, but we are unfairly bearing their punishment (Ezek. 18:2; Lam. 5:7). Others seem to have laid the blame for their punishment

on betrayal by lying prophets (Lam. 2:14). Psalm 79 reflects the spirit of the times: Why pick on us, God? We know you and call on you, unlike those foreign nations whom you should be punishing. Do not blame us for our ancestors' sins, but forgive us our own. Avenge us seven times on our taunting enemies.

Many who did understand God's judgment as just and necessary (Lam. 1:5, 18; 2:17) had lost all hope under the weight of their guilt; "how then can we live" (Ezek. 33:10)? The institutions in which they had hoped had been blasted away: priest, king, prophet, holy city (Lam. 2:6, 9b; 4:12, 20). "Our hope is lost," they said; "we are clean cut off" (Ezek. 37:11). Psalm 137 is a typical vignette of exilic life. The homesick exiles remember Jerusalem and vow never to forget. Tormented by their captors, they react with pathos seasoned by the desire for bloody vengeance. On the other hand, those who remained in the land were sometimes smug, imagining that in contrast to the exiles God's special favor had fallen on them (Ezek. 11:15; 33:24).

Loyalty to Yahweh had hit rock bottom. To some the lesson of history was clear. When our ancestors burned incense to the Queen of Heaven, things went well. When we abandoned her in favor of Yahweh, trouble came. So let us go back to our old syncretistic ways (Jer. 44:15-19). Egyptian exiles burned incense to other gods, forgetting the wickedness of their ancestors and former kings, still disobeying God's law (Jer. 44:8-10). They built a syncretistic temple at Elephantine. Babylonian exiles are quoted as thinking, "Let us be like the nations . . . and worship wood and stone" (Ezek. 20:32). The people violated dietary laws, lifted their eyes to idols, committed murder and fornication. They inquired of prophets but did not obey their words and treated them like artistic performers (Ezek. 33:25-26, 31-32).

It is possible to learn a great deal about the intended audience of Kings by reading the book itself. Kings expects its audience to have read Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and Samuel and makes reference to events, people, and laws in those books. Readers are expected to know Israel's saving traditions: the patriarchs (I Kings 18:36), the exodus (I Kings 6:1), Moses (II Kings 18:4), Horeb and the traditions of theophany (I Kings 19), the conquest (I Kings 21:26), and the judges (II Kings 23:22). They remember something about the ancient tribal system (I Kings 7:14; 8:4; 12:21, 23, 31; 15:27). They are expected to know well the geography of Jerusalem (I Kings 1:9; II Kings 20:11;