
1 & 2 KINGS

Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Kings

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1 & 2 KINGS

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ADVANCE PRAISE

No scholar of our time probes the heart of biblical faith more profoundly than Walter Brueggemann. With the passion of rhetorician and preacher, he interweaves interpretation and appropriation as so releases the power of ancient speech to inform and transform contemporary life. In turning his talents now to the books of Kings, he has given us a remarkable commentary.

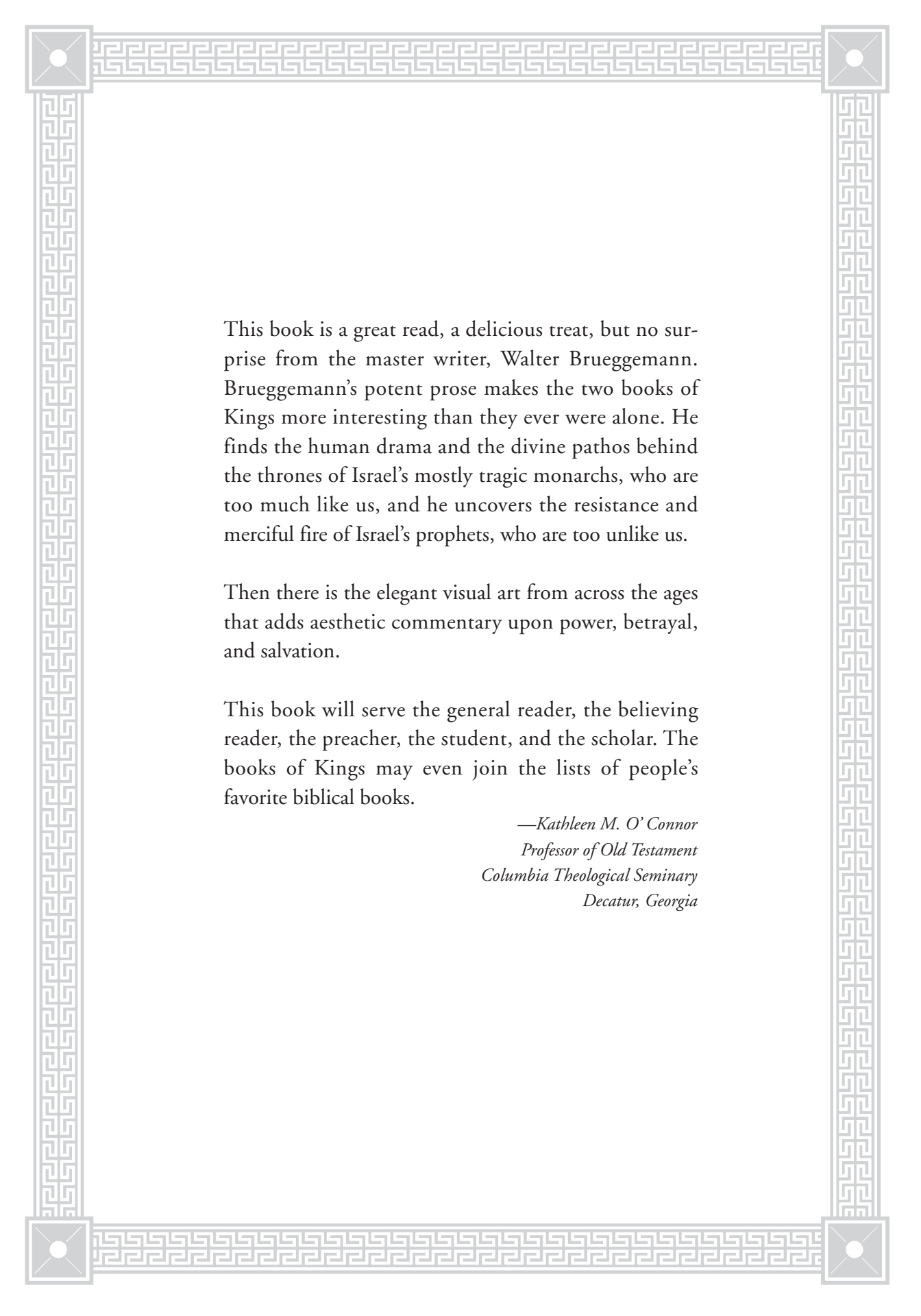
—*Phyllis Tribble*
Professor of Biblical Studies
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This book is vintage Walter Brueggemann. He is the consummate scholar. Yet, he writes in ways that make his work congenial to the pulpit. Brueggemann is a reminder that the academy and the parish, the scholar and the preacher, work together to offer the church our very best.

—*Charles B. Bugg*
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Brueggemann has the rare gift of making biblical texts understandable to general readers. In 1 and 2 Kings, he uses that gift well, enriching it with illustrations from art, current events, and popular culture. The result is a readable commentary that will evoke both surprise and pleasure.

—*James L. Crenshaw*
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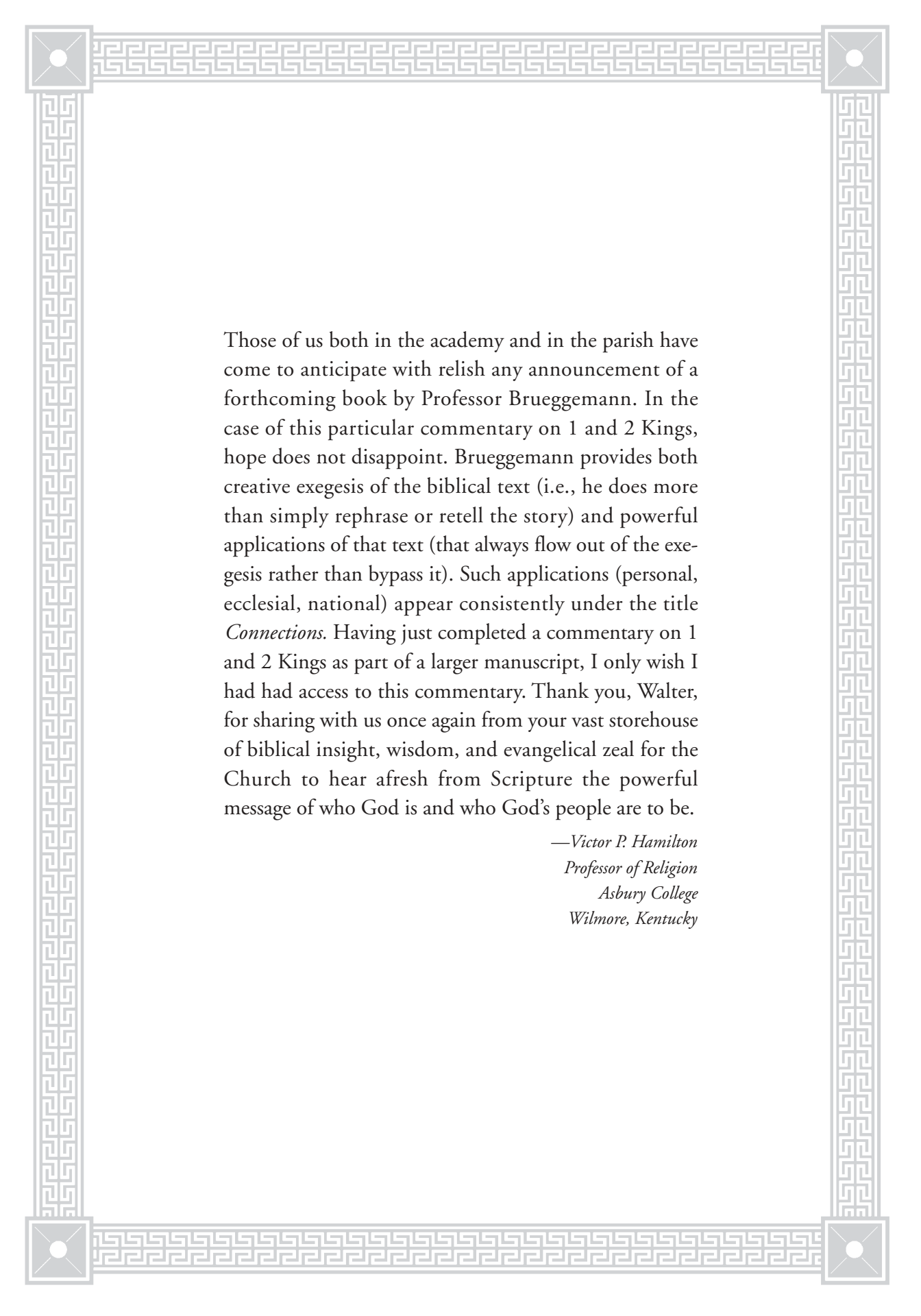


This book is a great read, a delicious treat, but no surprise from the master writer, Walter Brueggemann. Brueggemann's potent prose makes the two books of Kings more interesting than they ever were alone. He finds the human drama and the divine pathos behind the thrones of Israel's mostly tragic monarchs, who are too much like us, and he uncovers the resistance and merciful fire of Israel's prophets, who are too unlike us.

Then there is the elegant visual art from across the ages that adds aesthetic commentary upon power, betrayal, and salvation.

This book will serve the general reader, the believing reader, the preacher, the student, and the scholar. The books of Kings may even join the lists of people's favorite biblical books.

—*Kathleen M. O'Connor*
Professor of Old Testament
Columbia Theological Seminary
Decatur, Georgia



Those of us both in the academy and in the parish have come to anticipate with relish any announcement of a forthcoming book by Professor Brueggemann. In the case of this particular commentary on 1 and 2 Kings, hope does not disappoint. Brueggemann provides both creative exegesis of the biblical text (i.e., he does more than simply rephrase or retell the story) and powerful applications of that text (that always flow out of the exegesis rather than bypass it). Such applications (personal, ecclesial, national) appear consistently under the title *Connections*. Having just completed a commentary on 1 and 2 Kings as part of a larger manuscript, I only wish I had had access to this commentary. Thank you, Walter, for sharing with us once again from your vast storehouse of biblical insight, wisdom, and evangelical zeal for the Church to hear afresh from Scripture the powerful message of who God is and who God's people are to be.

—*Victor P. Hamilton*
Professor of Religion
Asbury College
Wilmore, Kentucky

In these volumes, Brueggemann gives the reader the benefit of his many years of reflection on the issues of violence and power in relation to the Scriptures. He approaches the text with his characteristic attention to literary nuance and shading, treating it as a connected narrative and interpreting it as such. He does not leave the text as a dead artifact, but shows its intriguing connection to both the New Testament and the modern world.

—*John N. Oswalt*
Research Professor of Old Testament
Wesley Biblical Seminary
Jackson, Mississippi

Most of the preaching and teaching I've heard has been from the New Testament. I know Jesus and Paul pretty well. When I move into the Old Testament, I'm unsure of myself. I suspect a lot of people are like me.

Walter Brueggemann's commentary on 1 and 2 Kings does not presume I am an Old Testament scholar. He takes me by the hand and leads me through violence and intrigue, strange names and places, and a plot line that is hard to follow. In short, he makes sense of it. I can use that kind of help.

—*Cecil E. Sherman*
Professor of Pastoral Ministries
Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond
Former Coordinator, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
Former Pastor of churches in Texas, North Carolina,
Georgia, New Jersey

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS COMMENTARY

Books of the Old Testament, Apocrypha, and New Testament are generally abbreviated in the Sidebars, parenthetical references, and notes according to the following system.

The Old Testament

Genesis	Gen
Exodus	Exod
Leviticus	Lev
Numbers	Num
Deuteronomy	Deut
Joshua	Josh
Judges	Judg
Ruth	Ruth
1–2 Samuel	1–2 Sam
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kgs
1–2 Chronicles	1–2 Chr
Ezra	Ezra
Nehemiah	Neh
Esther	Esth
Job	Job
Psalms (Psalms)	Ps (Pss)
Proverbs	Prov
Ecclesiastes	Eccl
or Qoheleth	Qoh
Song of Solomon	Song
or Song of Songs	Song
or Canticles	Cant
Isaiah	Isa
Jeremiah	Jer
Lamentations	Lam
Ezekiel	Ezek
Daniel	Dan
Hosea	Hos
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obadiah	Obad
Jonah	Jonah
Micah	Mic

Nahum	Nah
Habakkuk	Hab
Zephaniah	Zeph
Haggai	Hag
Zechariah	Zech
Malachi	Mal

The Apocrypha

1–2 Esdras	1–2 Esdr
Tobit	Tob
Judith	Jdt
Additions to Esther	Add Esth
Wisdom of Solomon	Wis
Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach	Sir
Baruch	Bar
Epistle (or Letter) of Jeremiah	Ep Jer
Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three	Pr Azar
Daniel and Susanna	Sus
Daniel, Bel, and the Dragon	Bel
Prayer of Manasseh	Pr Man
1–2 Maccabees	1–2 Macc

The New Testament

Matthew	Matt
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Romans	Rom
1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Cor
Galatians	Gal
Ephesians	Eph
Philippians	Phil
Colossians	Col
1–2 Thessalonians	1–2 Thess
1–2 Timothy	1–2 Tim
Titus	Titus
Philemon	Phlm
Hebrews	Heb
James	Jas
1–2 Peter	1–2 Pet
1–2–3 John	1–2–3 John
Jude	Jude
Revelation	Rev

Other commonly used abbreviations include:

BC	Before Christ
(also commonly referred to as BCE = Before the Common Era)	
AD	Anno Domini (“in the year of the Lord”)
(also commonly referred to as CE = the Common Era)	
v.	verse
vv.	verses
C.	century
c.	<i>circa</i> (around “that time”)
ed.	edition or edited by
trans.	translated by

Scholarly works cited by abbreviations include:

AB	<i>Anchor Bible</i>
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts</i>
BZAW	Beiheft zur <i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament—Supplemental Series
NIB	<i>New Interpreters Bible</i>
NRSV	<i>New Revised Standard Version of the Bible</i>
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTL	Old Testament Library
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

In the preparation of this commentary, I have collected many debts. Above all, I am grateful to Fred Whitehurst who handled the complexities of the artwork in an able and persistent way. Tim Simpson helped prepare the final form of the manuscript, and the indefatigable Tempie Alexander, one more time, worked her magic of transformation over my work. I am grateful to my friend, Sam Balentine, who invited me to participate in the series, and to Scott Nash, who dealt with matters of manuscript preparation for the press. Beyond all of that, I am fortunate to be among colleagues and students who foster an environment for sustained reflection and writing.

Walter Brueggemann

SERIES PREFACE

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* series is a visually stimulating and user-friendly series that is as close to multimedia as possible in print. Written by accomplished scholars with all students of Scripture in mind, the primary goal of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* series is to make available serious, credible biblical scholarship in an accessible and less intimidating format.

Far too many Bible commentaries fall short of bridging the gap between the insights of biblical scholars and the needs of students of God's written word. In an unprecedented way, the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* series brings insightful commentary to bear on the lives of contemporary Christians. Using a multimedia format, the volumes employ a stunning array of art, photographs, maps, and drawings to illustrate the truths of the Bible for a visual generation of believers.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* series is built upon the idea that meaningful Bible study can occur when the insights of contemporary biblical scholars blend with sensitivity to the needs of lifelong students of Scripture. Some persons within local faith communities, however, struggle with potentially informative biblical scholarship for several reasons. Oftentimes, such scholarship is cast in technical language easily grasped by other scholars, but not by the general reader. For example, lengthy, technical discussions on every detail of a particular scriptural text can hinder the quest for a clear grasp of the whole. Also, the format for presenting scholarly insights has often been confusing to the general reader, rendering the work less than helpful. Unfortunately, responses to the hurdles of reading extensive commentaries have led some publishers to produce works for a general readership that merely skim the surface of the rich resources of biblical scholarship. A visual generation of believers deserves a commentary series that contains not only the all-important textual commentary on Scripture, but images, photographs, maps, works of fine art, and drawings that bring the text to life.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* makes serious, credible biblical scholarship more accessible to a wider audience. Writers and editors alike present information in ways that encourage readers to gain a better understanding of the Bible. The editorial board has worked to develop a format that is useful and usable, informative and

pleasing to the eye. Our writers are reputable scholars who participate in the community of faith and sense a calling to communicate the results of their scholarship to their faith community.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* series addresses Christians and the larger Church. While both respect for and sensitivity to the needs and contributions of other faith communities is reflected in the work of the series authors, the authors speak primarily to Christians. Thus, the reader can note a confessional tone throughout the volumes. No particular “confession of faith” guides the authors, and diverse perspectives are observed in the various volumes. Each writer, though, brings to the biblical text the best scholarly tools available and expresses the results of their studies in commentary and visuals that assist readers seeking a word from the Lord for the Church.

To accomplish this goal, writers in this series have drawn from numerous streams in the rich tradition of biblical interpretation. The basic focus is the biblical text itself, and considerable attention is given to the wording and structure of texts. Each particular text, however, is also considered in the light of the entire canon of Christian Scriptures. Beyond this, attention is given to the cultural context of the biblical writings. Information from archaeology, ancient history, geography, comparative literature, history of religions, politics, sociology, and even economics is used to illuminate the culture of the people who produced the Bible. In addition, the writers have drawn from the history of interpretation not only as it is found in traditional commentary on the Bible but also in literature, theater, church history, and the visual arts. Finally, the *Commentary* on Scripture is joined with *Connections* to the world of the contemporary Church. Here again, the writers draw on scholarship in many fields as well as relevant issues in the popular culture.

This wealth of information might easily overwhelm a reader if not presented in a “user-friendly” format. Thus, the heavier discussions of detail and the treatments of other helpful topics are presented in special-interest boxes, or Sidebars, clearly connected to the passages under discussion so as not to interrupt the flow of the basic interpretation. The result is a commentary on Scripture that focuses on the theological significance of a text while also offering the reader a rich array of additional information related to the text and its interpretation.

An accompanying CD-ROM offers powerful searching and research tools. The commentary text, Sidebars, and visuals are all reproduced on a CD that is fully indexed and searchable. Pairing a

text version with a digital resource is a distinctive feature of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* series.

Combining credible biblical scholarship, user-friendly study features, and sensitivity to the needs of a visually-oriented generation of believers creates a unique and unprecedented type of commentary series. With insight from many of today's finest biblical scholars and a stunning visual format, it is our hope that the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* series will be a welcome addition to the personal libraries of all students of Scripture.

The Editors

HOW TO USE THIS COMMENTARY

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* series is written by accomplished biblical scholars with a wide array of readers in mind. Whether engaged in the study of Scripture in a church setting or in a college or seminary classroom, all students of the Bible will find a number of useful features throughout the commentary that are helpful for interpreting the Bible.

Basic Design of the Volumes

Each volume features an Introduction to a particular book of the Bible, providing a brief guide to information that is necessary for reading and interpreting the text: the historical setting, literary design, and theological significance. Each Introduction also includes a comprehensive outline of the particular book under study.

Each chapter of the commentary investigates the text according to logical divisions in a particular book of the Bible. Sometimes these divisions follow the traditional chapter segmentation, while at other times the textual units consist of sections of chapters or portions of more than one chapter. The divisions reflect the literary structure of a book and offer a guide for selecting passages that are useful in preaching and teaching.

An accompanying CD-ROM offers powerful searching and research tools. The commentary text, Sidebars, and visuals are all reproduced on a CD that is fully indexed and searchable. Pairing a text version with a digital resource also allows unprecedented flexibility and freedom for the reader. Carry the text version to locations you most enjoy doing research while knowing that the CD offers a portable alternative for travel from the office, church, classroom, and your home.

Commentary and Connections

As each chapter explores a textual unit, the discussion centers around two basic sections: *Commentary* and *Connections*. The analysis of a passage, including the details of its language, the history reflected in the text, and the literary forms found in the text, are the

main focus of the *Commentary* section. The primary concern of the *Commentary* section is to explore the theological issues presented by the Scripture passage. *Connections* presents potential applications of the insights provided in the *Commentary* section. The *Connections* portion of each chapter considers what issues are relevant for teaching and suggests useful methods and resources. *Connections* also identifies themes suitable for sermon planning and suggests helpful approaches for preaching on the Scripture text.

Sidebars

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* series provides a unique hyperlink format that quickly guides the reader to additional insights. Since other more technical or supplementary information is vital for understanding a text and its implications, the volumes feature distinctive Sidebars, or special-interest boxes, that provide a wealth of information on such matters as:

- Historical information (such as chronological charts, lists of kings or rulers, maps, descriptions of monetary systems, descriptions of special groups, descriptions of archaeological sites or geographical settings).
- Graphic outlines of literary structure (including such items as poetry, chiasm, repetition, epistolary form).
- Definition or brief discussions of technical or theological terms and issues.
- Insightful quotations that are not integrated into the running text but are relevant to the passage under discussion.
- Notes on the history of interpretation (Augustine on the Good Samaritan, Luther on James, Stendahl on Romans, etc.).
- Line drawings, photographs, and other illustrations relevant for understanding the historical context or interpretive significance of the text.
- Presentation and discussion of works of fine art that have interpreted a Scripture passage.

Each Sidebar is printed in color and is referenced at the

appropriate place in the *Commentary* or *Connections* section with a color-coded title that directs the reader to the relevant Sidebar. In addition, helpful icons appear in the Sidebars and link to a word or phrase of the same color within the text. These hyperlinks provide the reader with visual cues to the type of material that is explained in each Sidebar. Throughout the commentary, these four distinct hyperlinks provide useful links in an easily recognizable design.

ΑΩ

Alpha & Omega Language

This icon identifies the information as a language-based tool that offers further exploration of the Scripture selection. This could include syntactical information, word studies, popular or additional uses of the word(s) in question, additional contexts in which the term appears, and the history of the term's translation. All foreign terms are transliterated into the appropriate English characters.



Culture/Context

This icon introduces further comment on contextual or cultural details that shed light on the Scripture selection. Describing the place and time to which a Scripture passage refers is often vital to the task of biblical interpretation. Sidebar items introduced with this icon could include geographical, historical, political, social, topographical, and economic information. Here, the reader may find an excerpt of an ancient text or inscription that sheds light on the text. Or, one may find a description of some element of ancient religion such as Baalism in Canaan or the Hero cult in the Mystery Religions of the Greco-Roman world.



Interpretation

Sidebars that appear under this icon serve a general interpretive function in terms of both historical and contemporary renderings. Under this heading, the reader might find a selection from classic or contemporary literature that illumines the Scripture text or a significant quotation from a famous sermon that addresses the passage. Insights are drawn from various sources, including literature, worship, theater, church history, and sociology.



Additional Resources Study

Here, the reader finds a convenient list of useful resources for further investigation of the selected Scripture text, including books, journals, Web sites, special collections, organizations, and societies. Specialized discussions of works not often associated with biblical studies may also appear here.

Additional Features

Each volume also includes a basic Bibliography on the biblical book under study. Other Bibliographies on selected issues are often included that point the reader to other helpful resources.

Notes at the end of each chapter provide full documentation of sources used and contain additional discussions of related matters.

Abbreviations used in each volume are explained in a List of Abbreviations found after the Table of Contents.

Readers of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* series can regularly visit the Internet commentary support site for news, information, updates, and enhancements to the series at www.helwys.com/commentary.

Several thorough Indexes enable the reader to locate information quickly. These Indexes include:

- A *Sidebar Index* groups content from the special-interest boxes by category (maps, fine art, photographs, drawings, etc.).
- A *Scripture Index* lists citations to particular biblical texts.
- A *Topical Index* lists alphabetically the major subjects, names, topics, and locations referenced or discussed in the volume.
- A *Modern Authors Index* organizes contemporary authors whose works are cited in the volume.

INTRODUCTION

The books of First and Second Kings constitute the great “royal history” of Israel in the Old Testament. They trace the ups and downs of kingship all the way from the death of David (962) to the destruction of Jerusalem (587), with a brief addendum linked to the death of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 562. I have used the term “royal history” to recognize at the outset that this literature is concerned with “royal” data, that is, the policies, actions, and destinies of the several rulers of these two ancient states. In such an ancient patriarchal-royal society, it is clear that the future of the state and all of its members is linked to and largely determined by the future of its kings.

The phrase “royal history,” however, also includes the term “history.” And, indeed, in Christian accounts of the Old Testament, these two books are regularly reckoned to be “history.” No doubt these books form the most reliable timeline we have for the monarchy in these ancient states and articulate the primary shape of that ancient past through which this ancient community in two states is most commonly understood. Indeed, the timeline of this material has largely been adopted as normative, as we lack any alternative presentation. We have no better sustained data than is provided in these books. At the same time, to term this literature “history” in any modern sense of an accurate “factual” account of that past is widely recognized to be deeply problematic. Thus it is a difficult question to determine in any particular instance whether this “historical” report in the text is “factually” reliable. The problem in part is that the data is confusing and unclear and does not always confirm what we think we know from other, albeit sparse, sources. That is, taken as “history,” the detail of this account is not consistently reliable.

The greater problem, however, is that the narrative does not intend to be “history” as we, in our modern modes, understand the term. This narrative is not and does not purport to be a “factual account” of the monarchical past. Rather consistently the narrative “footnotes” its text in order to alert readers who want detailed “history” that they can go to the “sources” to check out the facts. These “sources”—now lost to us—are often specified:

The Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah (see 1 Kgs 15:7).

The Book of the Annals of the Kings of Israel (see 1 Kgs 16:20).

This narrative then is under no obligation to provide a full account of the “factual data,” but assumes that the curious reader can check that out in the library.

Thus our text is not “history.” It is, rather, an *interpretive commentary* upon that royal history or, as we might say, it is a “theology of history,” an attempt to understand the vagaries of lived public experience in that world with particular reference to YHWH, the God of Israel. This God is seen to be an active and decisive player in this lived history. This narrator has no interest in “royal history” as it might be articulated without reference to YHWH, and indeed the narrator believes that such an account is nonsensical and meaningless precisely because YHWH is decisive at every turn. For that reason, in the Jewish order of books in the Hebrew Bible these books are among the “Former Prophets” (along with Joshua, Judges, and Samuel) and are not offered at all as “history.”¹ Thus our text eschews any positivistic responsibility or option and wants to bear witness to the ways in which the God of Israel matters for the life and future of Israel.

Because these books are “prophecy” and not “history,”—that is, theological commentary and not factual reportage—it is important that we understand, as best we can, the perspective from which the theological interpretation is offered. We may identify four reference points in this interpretive perspective:

(1) The defining “fact” is that, in the end, the Holy City of *Jerusalem was destroyed* by an assault of the Babylonian armies. That is, the huge reality of this text—and of the entire Old Testament that cannot anywhere be avoided—is the ending of the city, the monarchy, and the temple. While Babylon is the proximate agent of that destruction, this interpretation presents Babylon (and Nebuchadnezzar, its ruler) as agents acting on behalf of Yahweh who wills that destruction of Yahweh’s own holy city.

(2) The defining “fact” of the destruction of Jerusalem reminds us that the subject of this long narrative is finally Jerusalem, the people, the government, and the God who abides there. In addition to the obvious subject of the monarchy that inhabits the city (to which the northern regime has no legitimate access), the other core symbol of the city’s holiness is *the Jerusalem temple*. The temple is crucial for the interpretive perspective of this narrative. At the end of the narrative we learn of the destruction of that temple (2 Kgs 24–25). At the beginning of the narrative, we have a long, careful report on its construction and dedication as a place of presence and forgiveness (1 Kgs 5–8). Between the glorious beginning of the temple and its pathos-filled ending, the temple—investing

the city with divine presence—is a major preoccupation of the narrative. Positively, we learn of temple reforms undertaken by pious Judean kings as a way to prize and enhance the temple for pure Yahwistic religion, thus replicating Solomon’s major achievement. Negatively, we learn of several instances when foreign intruders rob the temple, thus anticipating its brutal end. The narrator pays considerable attention to the temple as an indicator of Yahweh’s inclination toward the city.

(3) It is unmistakably evident, however, that the temple is a penultimate agenda for the narrator, for in the end, it is *Torah* that primarily occupies the interpretive energy of the narrative. The Torah—presumably the teaching tradition of Deuteronomy—is the norm and measure of what is good and evil in the public process. Indeed, 1 and 2 Kings are a Torah-focused assessment of the royal history. At the outset, the dying King David counsels his son Solomon to adhere to Torah:

Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn. Then the LORD will establish his word that he spoke concerning me: “If your heirs take heed to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel.” (1 Kgs 2:2-4)

His son, however, is seen to be indifferent to Torah, is warned about land loss (9:6-9), and in the end is judged harshly as a Torah-violator (1 Kgs 11:1–11).

In complementary fashion, King Josiah at the end of the narrative is presented as the quintessential Torah-keeper who functions as an alternative to Solomon (2 Kgs 23:25). The narrator works his case about monarchy, temple, and city in order to insist that power finally is not the arbiter of public life. What counts is Torah obedience as the measure of prosperity or trouble. Thus Torah relativizes all the royal claims of dynasty and all the sacerdotal claims of the priesthood to make a determined claim about the true character of Israel’s public history as the rule of Torah.

(4) In close connection to the Torah, this narrative account of royal history allots huge amounts of space to *the prophets* who are seen to be advocates of Torah requirements. When this literature is termed “latter prophets,” it may mean that the material itself is “prophetic” in submitting real life to Torah criteria. It also means, however, that we expect the cast of characters in the royal history to

include prophets, as indeed it does. In the reign of Solomon, Ahijah the prophet brings the near-death warrant to Solomon (1 Kgs 11:31-34). An unnamed “man of God” delivers the initial judgment against the Northern Kingdom (1 Kgs 13). In the long central section of the books, the report is especially interested in the Omri dynasty in northern Israel—except that the long account of the Omri dynasty is in fact primarily concerned with the prophets who dominate the narrative. In the latter part of the books, the prophet Isaiah is pivotal for King Hezekiah (2 Kgs 19:20-34). Jeremiah, by contrast, is not visible in the same way at the end of the seventh century, but as my exposition will detail, the narrative account of the final days of Jerusalem is intimately linked to the tradition of the prophet Jeremiah.

All of this means that the reader of these books must not expect too much “royal history,” but can watch as royal history is variously enhanced by the *temple*, critiqued by the *prophets*, and judged by the *Torah*. The clue to the whole is that Yahweh is the definitive actor in the public life of Israel; therefore all claims for *Realpolitik* are in fact provisional and penultimate.

The narrative is conventionally divided into three unequal parts. 1 Kings 1–11 narrates the reign of Solomon, marking his huge success, his singular achievement of the temple, and the serious Torah judgment lodged against him for his careless, disobedient self-indulgence.

1 Kings 12–2 Kings 17 is a long and fairly complex account of the two modest states of Israel and Judah, an account ending with the demise of the Northern state. This narrative account is distinguished in three principal ways. First, the narrative has adopted a complex scheme whereby the story line of the Northern and Southern governments are told in tandem, with periods of close interaction between the two and periods of hostility. Second, the two small states live in the real world of geopolitics; as a consequence these states are in turn under threat from the Syrian and Assyrian governments. The dominant feature of the demise of the Northern Kingdom is the presence of Assyria in whose path of ambition sits the capital city of Samaria. Third, this middle part of the books is dominated by prophetic figures—Elijah, Micaiah, and Elisha—so that in important ways, the kings are only context and setting for prophetic accounts. In any case, the Northern state is terminated, thus permitting a major interpretive marker in 2 Kings 17.

2 Kings 18–25 completes the account of the continuing state of Judah after the demise of the Northern state until the end in

587 BC (with the already mentioned addendum). The centerpiece of this section is “the Reform of Josiah” (2 Kgs 22–23) in which the king enacts Torah requirements for his realm in the face of heavy Torah sanctions (covenant curses). In this latter piece, the narrative apparently has opportunity, finally, to present a full-scale statement of the dominant interpretive agenda. That agenda is profoundly theological; thus the narrator has found a way in which to retell the public life of Israel and Judah, featuring Yahweh as the decisive factor, even in a world of menacing and unavoidable superpowers. Readers will do well to notice the interpretive angle of the piece and the artistic finesse whereby the interpretive agenda is brought to realization.

Finally, I should note that the chronology of the kings—even if in large part reliable—is complex and fractured in detail. I have elected to present two kinds of data for the royal chronology that are not compatible with each other in detail. First, in commenting on different kings, I have reported the length of years of rule as given in the text. Second, at the same time, I have situated each king according to a critical chronology.² In more than a few cases, it will be evident that the biblical and the critical numbers do not coincide. Both kinds of data are important, but it is not crucial for our purposes to reconcile them. Because the narrative is a sustained act of interpretation, the precise “facts” of chronology have no particular bearing on the account or its proposed meaning.

NOTES

¹On the characteristic problem of the category of “history” for interpreting this material, see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).

²I have chosen to follow the chronology utilized by John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

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1 KINGS

SOLOMON'S RISE TO POWER

1 Kings 1:1-53

AN INTRODUCTION TO 1 KINGS 1-11

These chapters begin with an account of David's death. That death is important for the characterization of the brutal way in which Solomon came to royal power. The chapters summarize the reign of Solomon. They artistically hold together an account of his economic success as judged by conventional political standards and an ominous critique of Solomon's disregard for Torah that evokes heavy and enduring judgment. In a general way, the narrative is organized with the positive materials in chapters 3-4 under the rubric, "Solomon loved Yahweh" (3:3) and the negative parts in chapters 9-11 under the rubric, "Solomon loved many foreign women" (11:1). Between these two stand chapters 5-7 concerning the construction of the temple, culminating in the dedication of chapter 8. In the judgment of this narrative, Solomon is quite a mixed bag of worldly success and Torah failure.

COMMENTARY

David as an Old Man, 1:1-4

As the books of Kings begin, David is "old and advanced in years" (1:1), then "very old" (1:15). The books of Kings begin with the demise and death of David and the struggle for the throne. The books of Samuel are dominated by David. He is there a wily, ruthless, blessed man of God. The story of his rise to power is saturated with violence, culminating in a series of "necessary and convenient" deaths (2 Sam 2-4). Because his reign is scarred by violence, it does not surprise us that this chapter about demise and succession is permeated with an undercurrent of violence. The old king is surrounded by ambitious sons and advisors, each of whom seeks advantage. The narrative, in subtle and understated ways, lets us see the workings of aggressive power cloaked in all the niceties of royal protocol.

The beginning point is David's failure (1:1-4). He has been a powerful, virile force, unafraid of violence, no stranger to the manipulation of sexual politics (see 1 Sam 25:42-44). But now "he could not get warm." We might take the phrase as a hint of poor circulation, except the antidote to his problem is a "very beautiful" young virgin. Her presence in the narrative (and in the king's bed) is not simply as a hot water bottle. Her role rather is to arouse the king sexually. Because of the last phrase of v. 4, "did not know her sexually," it is probable that "not get warm" means not to have an erection. Thus the point of the opening paragraph is to report the king's sexual impotence, his loss of virility, and therefore his disqualification as king. The end of David's virility, tested by a very "beautiful young virgin," opens the way for the following narrative, for there is now a functional vacancy on the throne. One senses the vultures around the court, circling for the kill.

Solomon's Victory, 1:5-53

There are, so the story runs, two candidates for successor to David, each with determined supporters in the court. **[Parties to the Conflict]** One candidate is Adonijah who takes aggressive action to seize the throne (1:5-10). He seems a plausible candidate for kingship. He is very handsome, a trait that runs in the family (1:6; see 1 Sam 16:12; 2 Sam 14:25). He looks like a king! Moreover, he is next in birth order to the tragic Absalom (see 2 Sam 3:3-4) and so has a



Parties to the Conflict

Clearly the competition for the throne between Adonijah and Solomon is not simply a personal rivalry, though it is surely that. Rather each of these sons of David is surrounded by a palace entourage that is jealously supportive of its candidate and for each member. A great deal is at stake professionally and personally. The adherents to Adonijah apparently are the established "ins." But more than that, they are likely the theological conservatives who take more seriously the old covenantal traditions. Conversely, the followers of Solomon are more likely those who want to see royal policies of a more "developmental" kind that will move Israel more into international trade and prosperity, a move that also implies important theological accommodations. Thus the dispute is a *policy* dispute expressed as a *leadership* struggle.

The party of Adonijah:

Joab, the military man;
(2 Sam 3:23-39; 11:14-25; 18:9-19:8)

Abiathar, the priest
(1 Sam 22:20, 2 Sam 15:24-29)

The party of Solomon:

Benaiah, the military man;
(2 Sam 8:18; 20:23)

Zadok, the priest;
(2 Sam 8:17; 15:24-37)

Nathan, the prophet.
(2 Sam 7:1-16; 12:1-15, 24-25)



In this sketch, Nathan does not appear as a prophet of the Lord. Though it has not been confirmed as to which meeting with David this sketch refers, here Nathan is markedly different in his demeanor in meeting with David as compared to their meeting on the aftermath of Uriah's death. On this occasion, he is shown humble and "deferential" before David, perhaps very aware of the importance of political timing. They are both couched in the blariness of old age which is captured so succinctly by Rembrandt with his use of a variety of line techniques ranging from parallel strokes, bold outlines, and light and dark contrasts. Rembrandt was intrigued by the aging countenance as seen in many of his works, i.e., the *Mother as a Prophetess*, the self-portraits, and numerous biblical illustrations.

Rembrandt van Rijn. *Nathan before King David*. 17th century. Pen and brush drawing. Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany. (Credit: Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY)

legitimate claim to the throne (see 1 Kgs 2:22). Indeed, his actions echo the royal pretensions of his brother Absalom (2 Sam 15:1-7): (a) he gathers for himself a showy royal entourage (1:5); (b) he engages in quite extravagant ritual activity (1:9); (c) he hosts a banquet for the royal family. These are all actions designed to evoke support for his candidacy. He seems to have learned nothing from his failed brother Absalom, for like him, he asserted himself without reckoning with the still formidable power of David to make or break his ambitious sons.

The narrative puts us immediately on notice of trouble to come. The would-be successor to David consults with two deeply established forces in the Jerusalem power structure, Joab, David's military chief of staff, and Abiathar, one of David's primary priests

(1:7). The two are leaders of the old guard. But ominously, he lacked the support of the other primary priest (Zadok), the number two military man (Benaiah), the prophet Nathan (who has no counterpart in his company), and the palace guard (“David’s own warriors”). From the outset it is clear that Adonijah has impressive resistance. The roster of resisters in v. 8, however, is intensified in the brief note of v. 10: “He did not invite...his brother Solomon.” This is the first mention of Solomon since the birth note of 2 Samuel 12:24-25. He has been kept in abeyance all this time by the narrator.

The plot of succession takes on poignancy with the narrative account of David’s resistance to Adonijah (1:11-37). This narrative relates a carefully choreographed strategy by which David, apparently now feeble and easily manipulated, is recruited as the decisive legitimator of Solomon, the second candidate for the throne and Adonijah’s serious rival. As we read on, it is clear that the impulsive efforts of Adonijah were rash and without the careful plotting needed in such a court dense with cunning. The role of the old king in securing the throne for Solomon is offered in five scenes (1:11-37).

Scene 1 (1:11-14). Nathan takes the initiative. This is the same Nathan who pronounced the decisive oracle legitimating David and “your offspring after you” (2 Sam 7:12), the one shrewd enough to confront and condemn David (2 Sam 12:1-15), and the one present at the naming of Solomon (2 Sam 12:24-25). He has heard of Adonijah’s coup and takes immediate steps to counter it. He recruits Bathsheba, mother of Solomon, as his foremost ally in intrigue. His urging to her suggests that if Adonijah’s claim to the throne succeeds, Solomon will lose not only the throne. As primary rival, his life will be in jeopardy; such is the ruthlessness of royal aggression. Nathan gives Bathsheba her lines to speak to David; he scripts the entire scenario. His words in her mouth are to be put to David in pretend-innocence: “Did you not?...” The form of a question is subtle, for in fact it implies that David had made a promise to Bathsheba which, so far as the narrative goes, David had not uttered. That is, the leading question introduces to David something hoped for but never promised.

Scene 2 (1:15-21). Bathsheba performs her role dutifully as instructed by Nathan. She goes to David, into the very room where David is now with the “very beautiful young virgin.” The meeting is perhaps a grating one for Bathsheba, to see the virgin now occupying her place.

For whatever reason, she modifies the lines Nathan had given her. Now it is not, “Did you not?...” as in v. 13, but “You swore...” The question has become a fact. The ruthless mother generates new political reality. [The Queen Mother Petitions] The alleged oath of David to Bathsheba now becomes the premise for the rest of the story. According to the “revised version,” Solomon is designated, but “now suddenly...” (1:18) Adonijah’s preemptive acts are characterized with particular notice of the exclusion of Solomon (see v. 10). In v. 20, Bathsheba puts it squarely to David: David must act promptly and decisively and for Solomon...or Solomon and his mother will be “offenders,” that is, enemies of the new king whose lives are endangered (see v. 12). The speech of Bathsheba is a daring and imaginative one, creating a political crisis from which David can extricate himself in only one way, for he dare not renege on his vow!

Scene 3 (1:22-27). On cue, Nathan intrudes in order to support Bathsheba’s urging, as planned in v. 14. Whereas Bathsheba had moved Nathan’s ploy of two questions to an indicative in v. 17, Nathan returns to a mode of questioning that is more deferential, less risky. Nathan recites for the king, as Bathsheba has just done, the aggressive acts of Adonijah. But his recital is framed in vv. 24 and 27 by two questions. The questions suggest a reprimand to the king, not a reprimand about what the king ostensibly has done, but a scolding that David allegedly has acted without telling Nathan. The prophet subtly shames the king for acting without his counsel; Nathan’s tone is as if the prophet believes David has indeed authorized Adonijah, even though Nathan knows better.

Scene 4 (1:28-31). The feeble king has now been effectively assaulted on two fronts, by Bathsheba whose indicative holds the king to an oath neither he nor the narrator can remember and by the soft reprimand of Nathan who shoves the king away from Adonijah and toward Solomon. The double strategy works. David is now resolute. He addresses Bathsheba and promises to act on his vow that he had not remembered but now remembers clearly and with great determination. David—reminded and reprimanded—is still the key player, still master of his own house, still capable of an act of great authority. Bathsheba’s concluding response in v. 31 is perhaps ironic. On the face of it, it is a conventional court formula. In this context, however, she can see that the king is dying; she is



The Queen Mother Petitions

As we will see more clearly in 1 Kgs 2, Bathsheba will occupy the powerful office of “queen mother” with great aplomb. In this narrative, however, she is not yet queen mother. She is only the vigorous advocate for her son who is top candidate for king. And while she will soon be “elevated” in power and prestige, here she is only a suppliant. The narrative presents her as a humble petitioner, perhaps on her knees before the king.



In this depiction, the trumpets call attention to the anointing of an individual, framed more by personality and the royal moment than by the power of collective ritual and the sacramental act of anointing.

Julius Schnoor von Carolsfeld. *Solomon Named to Succeed David*. 19th century. Woodcut. from *Das Buch der Bucher in Bildern*. (Credit: Dover Pictorial Archive Series)

ready to have him die with the new Solomonic legitimacy in hand. Thus her wish that the king “live forever” is less than earnest.

Scene 5 (1:32-37). All that remains to be done is royal drama. David summons “the other side” to create “the other king.” Zadok and Benaiah, leaders of the high court party, are to do the deed. David knows the power and cruciality of royal theater. Solomon is to ride “my own mule,” to be seen in the king’s limo, like arriving on “Air Force One.” The new king is to arrive at the river Gihon, perhaps the same source of water for Jerusalem where life-and-death political decisions are enacted. There the “churchy types,” the

ones in Yahwistic roles—priest and prophet—are to administer the sacramental oil of anointing, even as David had long ago received Yahweh’s designation by oil (1 Sam 16:13). The sacramental act is to be matched by public drama: trumpets, acclamation, royal procession, enthronement. David knows how to make a king! In the end, “I have designated.” David’s nod is decisive. This is David’s throne, and he will assign it as he chooses.

The end of the drama gives the last word to Benaiah who is now about to replace Joab as top military man (1:36-37). The military man sounds the name of Yahweh. The military man dares to expect that Yahweh will “ordain” what palace intrigue has evoked and what the duped David has enacted. Moreover, the military man

ΑΩ Royal Sacramental Theater

The act of anointing as a visible, observable act is simple and unexpressive. It consists simply of putting oil on the head of someone. It may be that originally anointing was taken to be an act of *healing*. But then it also became an act of *empowerment*.

But what is important is not simply the act of oil, but the *sacramental* understanding of the act whereby it was trusted that something *theologically effective* is done that decisively impinges upon the recipient of the oil. In this regard, the act is like every sacramental act: it bears powerful significance only for those who trust the act and read out of it symbolic, effective power.

We may imagine that such anointing has two intertwined dimensions. On the one hand, it is taken as a *deeply freighted theological act*. Thus it is understood that with the *oil* comes the *spirit*, that is, the “force of God,” to do important things and the authority to enact them. This theological enactment is powerful even if it is done in secret or in private, as with the young boy David (1 Sam 16:12-13). But the deeply theological act comes readily to be understood as *royal theater*, that is, a public relations device to make visible power and authority that is to be received by the king. While such a theatrical performance of course can be manipulated and cynical, at its best the visible drama of the act and its theological significance cannot be separated from each other.

The verb “anoint” is in Hebrew *mashah*. This is no special theological term, but simply means to “smear.” Characteristically the Old Testament has no special, privileged theological vocabulary, but uses ordinary words that take on special meanings. The verb simply mean “to apply oil.” But the same Hebrew term is used as a noun (*mashah*), “the one anointed,” that is, designated and empowered. When the proper vowels for the noun are supplied, the

term is “messiah,” the one anointed. But one must be clear that in its early narrative use, the noun only refers to the king (or later the priest) who is designated for office. Although the term indicates entry into special power, it does not carry any very heavy theological overtone. Only slowly and belatedly, the noun “messiah” (anointed) came to have theological, anticipatory significance, so that the “messiah” is the one anointed who will eventually come to enact God’s will on earth. But the thick, theological dimension is not yet present in our text.

For Christians, it is important to recognize that the noun “messiah,” derived from the verb *mashah*, translated into the Greek as “Christ.” That is, Christ is the one empowered by special oil. In older traditions, there could be many messiahs (even a Persian one in Isa 45:1), who were empowered to do God’s will in the earth, and only late does the term develop into exclusive particularity as “the (one) Messiah,” that is, the Christ. Our text evidences an early usage that precedes the development of the term so common in later Christian usage.

The term is used for a variety of kings in the Old Testament, including the non-Israelite king, Hazael, in 2 Kings 9:15-16:

Royal anointings:

The anointed king in anticipation (1 Sam 2:10).

Saul (1 Sam 9:16; 10:1; 15:1, 17; 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23; 2 Sam 1:14, 16).

David (1 Sam 16:12-13; 2 Sam 2:4, 7; 5:3, 17; 12:7; 19:21).

Solomon (1 Kgs 1:34, 39, 45; 5:1).

Hazael (1 Kgs 19:15-16).

Jehu (2 Kgs 9:3, 6, 12).

Joash (2 Kgs 11:12).

Jehoahaz (2 Kgs 23:30).



Solomon in the Midst of Adonijah

Narrative arrangements in the Old Testament are characteristically done with sensitivity and shrewd design, and never by accident. In the present case, it is clear that the narrative about Solomon in vv. 11-40 is the decisively important part of the narrative. It begins with the intrigue of Nathan and Bathsheba in v. 11 and it concludes with the public acclamation of the new king in vv. 39-40.

But the dramatic tension of the narrative depends upon the Solomonic account of anointing being situated in the midst of the Adonijah narrative. In vv. 5-10 Adonijah assertively takes the initiative toward the throne, and in vv. 41-53 Adonijah

must deal with the fearful residue of Solomon's achievement. From the perspective of Adonijah's party, Solomon interrupts the story of Adonijah. From Solmonic perspective, however, the true account of anointing is surrounded by an upstart who must be overcome, intimidated, and squelched. The juxtaposition of narrative sections makes the tension keen, until it is resolved into the exaltation of Solomon and the humiliation of Adonijah:

a vv. 5-10 Adonijah

b vv. 11-40 Solomon

a' vv. 41-53 Adonijah.

dreams of expansion (military?) so that Solomon's throne will outdo David. We do not know, of course, if Benaiah's blessing is to be taken at face value, or if it is ironic. The subtlety of this manipulative drama suggests that none of the words by any of the speakers is quite what it appears to be.

The narrative legitimacy of vv. 11-37 is quickly enacted in vv. 38-40. Everything goes as planned. The principle players are, again, Zadok, Nathan, and Benaiah. They occupy the royal role. They arrive at the river of royal drama. Zadok administers the oil and so creates a "messiah" (1:39). [Royal Sacramental Theater] The trumpets are blown; Solomon is acclaimed king, as per David's instructions. The account mentions one other presence, "Cherethites and Pelethites," "David's own warriors" (see 1:8). They are the hired mercenaries who supply the muscle for the throne as popular support ebbs. The whole is an in-house drama. The public ritual dramatizes the agreements made in private.

The people come late to the deal and the narrative does not pretend otherwise (1:39-40). The public celebration is enormous; perhaps the public is easily managed by royal drama. Perhaps there really was devotion to the new king, though that seems improbable. Perhaps the public is so devoted to the old king that his designation is enough. In any case, the public has no voice in what has been enacted.

The anointing of Solomon constitutes the central material of this chapter. It is, however, framed by an Adonijah narrative. [Solomon in the Midst of Adonijah] Before the Solomonic episode, we have seen Adonijah's self-assertion (1:5-10). Now, in the wake of Solomon's enthronement, we return to Adonijah (1:41-53). First there is the public report to the king's sons (1:41-48). The party is still going on from v. 9. Now the revelry is decisively interrupted. The son of Abiathar, one of Adonijah's stalwarts, brings the news. Jonathan is

expected to bring “good news” (gospel; v. 42). But the news is not good. He reports in detail the drama of Solomon (1:43-48). He names the principles of Solomon’s enterprise, names surely capable of evoking fear; he mentions the royal role; he characterizes the sacramental act of anointing. He summarizes the public acclaim. The narrative is skillful in reiterating in familiar detail and sequence the decisive turn of affairs. The entire process is sanctioned by David who, in the feebleness of his bedridden state, provides a Yahwistic endorsement of it all (1:48). Nathan’s question is answered. Bathsheba’s alleged vow from David is enacted. Jerusalem’s throne is redeployed. It is a done deal.

The public report is followed by a response of profound fear (1:49-53). The crowd disperses frantically (1:49). Nobody wants to be seen in public with Adonijah. But the narrator is not interested in the crowd. The object of attention is Adonijah. Earlier it had been acknowledged that if Adonijah won, Solomon and his mother are dead ducks (1:12, 21). Now the shoe is on the other foot. Adonijah is now the one in mortal danger. He flees to the altar as a place of sanctuary. [Solomon on the Horns of a Dilemma] Solomon promises a “safe conduct” for



Solomon on the Horns of a Dilemma

The altar of Israel in the pre-temple period was perhaps not much developed, as it was to be later under Solomon. It was, nonetheless, a place of sanctuary, a place to be safe and protected from any who would hurt or kill. “The horns of the altar” refers to a construction whereby at the corner of the altar, horns protruded. Archaeologists have found such altars, for example at Megiddo. The “horns” were a place to “grab on,” as a source of physical connection to the security of the altar.

While Adonijah held to the horns, it is Solomon who faces a dilemma. Either he may respect the place of sanctuary and so let Adonijah live, who will surely be a continuing threat to him. Or he can violate the holy sanctuary and seize his competitor and dispose of him. Neither is a good choice. For the moment, Solomon manages to circumvent his dilemma. But only for the moment. It will not take long, in the second chapter, before Adonijah is dispatched (2:25), and Solomon has no more dilemma. This king, like every king, must deal with such dilemmas promptly and ruthlessly. But that is, in this narrative, deferred.



Horned altars have been discovered at many Iron Age sites in Israel and were prevalent in biblical accounts. The Megiddo stratum in which this altar was found was characterized by large public structures and is generally thought to have been built by King Solomon. It included a four-entryway gate and a well-built double wall.

Four-Horned Incense Altar. Palestine. Megiddo, Stratum VA-IVB. Iron Age IIA, 10th century BC. Limestone. Height 67.5 cm. University of Chicago. Excavated by the Oriental Institute, 1926. Chicago, Illinois. (Credit: Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago)

his brother that is hedged by a harsh, demanding condition: “*if* he is worthy.” That is, if he is completely loyal to Solomon and is no longer a rival and threat. Adonijah has no option. He knuckles under to the new king. He swears allegiance and is tersely dispatched out of court. Solomon is the winner in the deathly contest. David has willed it; Yahweh has blessed it; the military has guaranteed it. Judah has a new king; the throne is now assigned by choreographed intrigue, sacramental acts that smack of cynicism, and guaranteeing military power. We are ready for the story of “the kings” to unfold. Adonijah has “gone home.”

CONNECTIONS

The beginning chapter of the books of Kings already plunges us into the most interesting and most difficult issue faced in this account of Israel’s monarchy: the interplay of *raw, crude politics* and the insistence that this particular history is *an arena for God’s purposes*. It is not easy to hold together in tension raw, crude politics and the sense of God’s purposes, but this narrative is agile and subtle in doing just that.

The primary story line of the chapter is readily governed by the practice of politics that is calculating, manipulative, and at the brink of violence. Awareness of these features in the narrative makes clear that biblical faith—especially royal faith—takes place in the real world where the stakes are high and players will go to great lengths and run great risks to acquire their goals. The Bible has too often been treated and read as a sweet story of men and women of faith acting in the world according to their faith. In reality, however, things are much more complicated. One of the hallmarks of the Bible is that its primary characters are men and women who face reality and live as best they can. They pay some attention to the claims of faith but at the same time are quite unromantic about the dangers, threats, and options that are grounded concretely. We may notice in this chapter three aspects of such raw, crude politics.

1. The political life of the royal court in Jerusalem is deeply disputed, as the court is divided in its leadership into clear factions. We are accustomed in the Bible (as in the neat royal history of Great Britain, for example) to recite the time line of monarchs as though they are easily and obviously one after another. But the time line is only a thin summary of winners, behind which, in detailed narrative, are the messy realities of struggle and rivalry.



On Political Sex

David, a military man as well as a political leader, is well schooled in the practice of exploitative sex. I have commented elsewhere on “military sex” in relation to David in 2 Samuel 11:

The immediate context of military culture, moreover, is sustained by a larger context of greed and exploitation, brutality and economic promiscuity that is without neighborliness, a culture into which we are all more or less inducted. David, Uriah, and Joab are not actors in a vacuum, but participants in a military culture that the narrator lets us see.

Walter Brueggemann, “Abuse of Command,” *Sojourners* 26/4 (July-August, 1997): 24.

In this narrative, the factions are clear, with the Adonijah party perhaps representing the old tribal conservatism and the Solomonic party, led by Nathan, an ambitious coalition of those eager for “social development” and public advance. Clear to all parties, moreover, is that a struggle to control the future is a serious one in which playing for keeps is the name of the game. The dispute is partly a struggle between persons who lust for power. But the two parties also embody important ideological commitments that involve more than simply personal ambition.

2. The entry point of the narrative suggests that this politics is never far from sexuality. [On Political Sex] Politics and sexuality, in a macho society, represent twin possibilities for domination. It is evident in vv. 1-4 that we are here into the “politics of virility.” David had been, in his long life, no stranger to virility of a crude kind, as we are told in terms of his readiness to “take” the wife of Nabal (1 Sam 25:39-44), and more notably the wife of Uriah the Hittite (2 Sam 11-12). Moreover, the tale of Amnon his son in 2 Samuel 13-14 and the report of the eagerness of Absalom, his rebellious son, to seize his father’s concubines indicate that a part of royal legitimacy is the endless demonstration of a capacity for macho domination (2 Sam 16:20-22).

It is this history and aura of domination that make the David of vv. 1-4 so pitiful. Indeed, his “failure to get warm” evokes the savage contest among his sons to see which son will replace the failed father.

Attentiveness to such a theme permits an important link, in our own time and place, to our own “politics of virility” as we are beset with the sexual exploits of public leaders, or as we learn increasingly about the endless exploitation of “military sexuality,” or as we notice professional sports that trade in virility complete with “cheer leaders.” All such marketing of sexuality is in the interest of domination, as it was in that ancient society.

3. Beyond partisan dispute and the politics of virility, however, we notice that the struggle for succession is close to the edge of violence in a sustained way. Reading this text is not unlike watching the film *The Godfather*. The ominous music that accompanies the film means to suggest that violence can break out at any moment. This chapter should be read with a background of such ominous music.

In the narrative observe that if Adonijah wins, the lives of Bathsheba and Solomon are jeopardized (1:12, 21). On the other hand and more importantly, we are privileged to witness a scene of deep anxiety among the party of Adonijah when Solomon's coup is announced. The guests "tremble" and flee (1:49). Adonijah, moreover, flees to the safety of the sanctuary (1:50). Nobody among the losers is safe! It is as though all parties accept that their lives will be exterminated if they do not prevail. This story turns upon the near threat of violence, neither the first nor the last time the shape of public life is rooted in violence.

The plot line moves through partisanship, virility, and the deep threat of violence, soon to be enacted. We do not read this text for the sake of these accents. We read, rather, because we take this text in some definitive way as *scripture*, as revelatory of God's ways in the world, as God moves in and through and beyond the violence and virility.



As suggested by this illustration from *The Godfather* movie, the calm of hushed communication and scheming was often a prelude to unspoken violence and power clash.

(Credit: Barclay Burns. Graphite illustration.)

This chapter, taken by itself, does not give us much to go on. In Bathsheba's cunning suggestion (1:17) and in David's trusting, bewitched response (1:30), it is as though Solomon receives the throne on the basis of an oath in the name of Yahweh, the God of Israel. As we have seen, however, such a claim is not very secure. Beyond that, all we have is the affirmation of Benaiah, the military officer with most to gain (1:36-37), and the utterance of the feeble David that echoes the dynastic promise of 2 Samuel 7 (1:48). These are thin claims. Nevertheless they suggest that the players themselves, or the players as offered by the narrative, understand that there is more to the tale than crude self-promotion. Another purpose is at work here, perhaps larger than all of the manipulation. The narrative itself barely provides grounds for such a claim, but it is a claim deeply held by the faithful who always find clues to God at work in our lived world. Most to be noticed, I submit, is the thinness of the evidence and the daring quality of the theological claim.

Beyond that, we may notice two specific features of the story. First, David commands *the anointing* that is implemented by Zadok the priest (1:34, 39). The notion of anointing—sacramental designation by the pouring on of oil—is a very special act in biblical faith. Anointing is reckoned in 2 Kings 9:12 as a dangerous, subversive, revolutionary act that evokes political activity. In our context, such an act recalls the personal designation of David who, by anointing, is filled with power and given a future that culminates in kingship (1 Sam 16:13). For Christians, of course, the verb “anoint” (*mashah*) becomes the noun “messiah” that in the Greek is “Christ.” And so we dare conclude that in the midst of these raw acts of politics, we are set toward the messiah of Bethlehem and Nazareth. It is a stretch of interpretation but one long made in Christian reading.

Finally, we pay attention to “Solomon” who is here no major actor, but a passive recipient of events. He is the beloved of Yahweh (2 Sam 12:24-25), as though predestined for rule. He is “great David's greater son” (see v. 37). As we shall see, there is something ironic about his name (Solomon=*shalom* “peace”), for his ways of governance are rooted in violence scarcely linked to *shalom*. A Christian reading, nevertheless, takes this Solomon as a link in the coming of great David's greater son who will indeed bring *shalom*. Such a reading is made in faith, but it does not deny or nullify the realism of the narrative.