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978-0-521-09774-1 - The Second Book of Kings

J. Robinson

Excerpt

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THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS

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WHAT THE BOOK IS ABOUT

The Second Book of Kings tells the story of the decline and fall of the two Hebrew kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Each in turn was defeated by a stronger enemy and its territory annexed. In the end both Israel and Judah had ceased to exist as independent states. Thus, this book completes the story of the two Israelite kingdoms. The earlier part of that story has already been told in the books that precede 2 Kings in the Old Testament. Indeed, 2 Kings was not intended to be a separate book. It is the second part of the book of Kings which, in the original Hebrew, is one book, and the whole of Kings was itself the concluding part of the story of the Israelites which had already been told in Joshua, Judges and the two books of Samuel. Kings like Samuel was divided into two by the men who translated it into Greek for the very practical reason that the Greek took up more space than the Hebrew and the Greek version of Kings was too long for one scroll.

THE EARLIER HISTORY OF THE ISRAELITES

The story of the settlement of the Hebrew tribes in Palestine is told in the book of Joshua. Then in the book of Judges there follows a description of the life of the people as a group of tribes led by tribal leaders from the time of the settlement until they became a kingdom. The account of the creation of that kingdom under Saul and David is told in the two books of Samuel. 1 Kings follows with the story of the united kingdom

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under David's son Solomon and also tells of the break which followed after his death when the kingdom was split in two. Of the twelve tribes which had made up the united kingdom, only two, Judah and Benjamin, remained loyal to the successors of David and Solomon. They formed the kingdom of Judah with Jerusalem as its capital. The other ten tribes refused to accept the rule of Solomon's son and formed their own kingdom, called the kingdom of Israel with its capital at first situated at Shechem. By the time of the events which are narrated in 2 Kings the capital of Israel had been transferred to another city, Samaria. One of the stronger kings of Israel, Omri, had built a new city on the hill of Samaria and transferred the capital there. Samaria remained the capital of the kingdom for the rest of its history and even after the destruction of the kingdom remained the chief city of the area so that the region around it was known even in New Testament times as Samaria.

SAMARIA AND ISRAEL

The use of names can cause confusion. Samaria is first the name of a city. Then it is sometimes used as an alternative name for the kingdom, and later it was used as the name of a geographical area. Similarly, the name Israel can be used in more than one sense. It can refer to the united kingdom of the twelve tribes created by David and ruled, after his death, by Solomon. It is also the name of the northern kingdom of the ten tribes who rebelled against Solomon's son. To add to the difficulty, it can be used in a rather different sense, to refer to the Hebrews as the particular people with whom God had entered into covenant and who therefore ought to live in obedience to his will and seek to fulfil his purposes. In this last use, the name is being used with a religious rather than a political significance.

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THE STORY TOLD IN 1 KINGS

The reader of 2 Kings is thus thrust into the middle of a story that has already been more than half told. It is as though he or she opened a book and began to read only the last half of it, or went into a cinema when the film was already half over. A summary of the story of 1 Kings may, therefore, help the reader to understand 2 Kings better. 1 Kings tells of Solomon's accession to the throne and his reign, giving great prominence to his building of the temple at Jerusalem. After Solomon's death his kingdom was torn apart. His son Rehoboam followed him as king in Jerusalem but he had authority only over the much reduced kingdom of Judah. The northern ten tribes formed their own kingdom, Israel, and appointed the man who had led their revolt, Jeroboam, as their king. This division opened up again long-standing differences between northern and southern Israelites which had been a feature of Israelite life ever since the original settlement. David had for a time united the two groups and Solomon had managed to avert division in his own lifetime, but neither had been able to create any lasting bond of unity between the northern and southern parts of the kingdom. 1 Kings tells the story of this division and then gives an account of the reign of each successive king of both Israel and Judah. The story of each king is told in chronological order and so the narrative continually moves to and fro from Judah to Israel and back again. At first the two kingdoms were hostile to each other but by the time 1 Kings has come to an end with the reigns of Ahab in Israel and Jehoshaphat in Judah, the original hostility had turned to alliance. In part this alliance was a recognition of the fact that Israel was much stronger than Judah. It contained more fertile land and the international trade routes between Mesopotamia and Egypt passed through its territory. Judah had come to accept the fact of Israel's dominance. There was also the fact that both kingdoms were thrust together by a mutual threat from another power which menaced their very existence.

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Ahab and Elijah

That power was Assyria, an empire with its homeland in northern Mesopotamia. By the ninth century B.C. Assyria had made herself the dominant power in Mesopotamia and begun to send her armies westwards along the valley of the upper Euphrates to attack the kingdoms of Syria. Her aim was to control all the land along the river systems of Mesopotamia and Syria in order to contain the power and influence of Egypt, the great rival empire, and eventually to attack Egypt itself. Ahab and Jehoshaphat had both been members of a coalition of the armies of the various Syrian states which had fought the Assyrian army at Qarqar on the river Orontes in 853 B.C. and forced it to retreat.

AHAB AND ELIJAH

Ahab was a strong king and has a prominence in 1 Kings second only to Solomon, though his strength was not the reason for that prominence. Just as Solomon was portrayed in 1 Kings before all else as the builder of the temple, so Ahab is shown as the king who refused to listen to a true prophet of God. Ahab was the son of Omri who had built the new capital of Samaria. Omri was also the founder of a new dynasty of kings and the originator of a new foreign policy. He made alliances of friendship with his neighbours which may have helped to pave the way for the alliance of forces against Assyria in 853 B.C. The marriage of his son Ahab to Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, was a part of that policy. Yet by pursuing such a policy he aroused the opposition of the prophet Elijah and much prominence is given in the latter part of the narrative of 1 Kings to the controversy between these two men.

Elijah saw the people of his day as being corrupted from their true allegiance to Yahweh their God by the influence of the religion of their Canaanite neighbours. Israel had originally taken the land from Canaanites and many Canaanites still lived among the Israelites. Canaanite religion was thus already well known to the Israelites and alliances with Canaanite

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states could only add to that influence. Elijah, and those who shared his point of view, feared that the religion of Israel which had been the most creative and active force among the people since the time of the settlement, and even before, would be destroyed by Omri's policy. In 1 Kings Omri is only briefly mentioned but Ahab his son is shown as one of the main characters in the book because of his struggle with the prophet Elijah. The narratives in 2 Kings which give great prominence to Elisha, the disciple and successor of Elijah, are to be understood as further illustrations of the conflicts between loyal prophets and disloyal kings.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE PROPHETS ON THE
COMPILER OF KINGS

The compiler of Kings was convinced that prophets such as Elijah or Elisha were right, and that kings such as Ahab were wrong. In fact the point of view from which Kings is written is very similar to that of the prophets whose teaching is given in the Old Testament. (It may be noted that in the Hebrew Bible the books Joshua–2 Kings are not described as history books but as 'The Former Prophets', and as such are linked with the books of the prophets, Isaiah–Malachi, which are called 'The Latter Prophets'.) Now the story of the two kingdoms is a story of failure and disaster, and with a very few notable exceptions kings are presented as the villains who, by their bad policies, brought about the disaster, while prophets, notably Elijah and Elisha, are portrayed as God's spokesmen who stood for what was right and true but were ignored by the kings. The one great difference between the point of view expressed in Kings and that expressed in the writings of the prophets is that in Kings the temple at Jerusalem and all that went on in it is looked upon as the chief glory of the people of Israel, while some at least of the prophets were strongly critical of the place that the temple had come to fill in the life of the people, and all were critical of the

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The deuteronomists

significance attached by the people to the sacrifices that took place in the temple. In Kings the only kings who are unreservedly praised are Solomon who built the temple, and Hezekiah and Josiah, the two kings who tried to reform and purify the religious practices carried out there.

THE DEUTERONOMISTS

This attitude towards the temple and the kings which is found consistently throughout the two books of Kings points to the conclusion that the writer or writers were members of a school of theologians who are generally known as the deuteronomists. Kings was not written by any one man. It was created by an editor collecting together material written by other men in such a way as to use that material to express his own point of view. And even when this had been done, a second editor might have altered the work of the first. We do not know who these men were individually, but they have been given the name deuteronomists from a reform of the temple which was undertaken by King Josiah in 621 B.C. A good deal of space in 2 Kings is devoted to the details of that reform. 2 Kings 22: 3-13 relates how Hilkiyah, one of the temple priests, discovered an old book of law in the temple. It set out regulations for temple worship, particularly for the offering of sacrifice, which were not being followed in Judah at that time. It laid down, for example, that the Jerusalem temple was the only place where Israelites could legitimately offer sacrifice. Josiah instituted his reform to bring practice into conformity with the regulations set out in that book. Although the account of the reform does not specifically state it, it is usually accepted that the law book which Hilkiyah discovered was the whole or part of the book Deuteronomy. Hence the reform is commonly referred to as the deuteronomic reform. Such a reform would have interpreted and modified Israelite law in the direction suggested by the prophets, and a writer of the deuteronomic school would have looked upon the temple as

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the most important institution in the kingdom, and the prophets as the true religious teachers of the people. This is very clearly the point of view of the editor of Kings.

The deuteronomists also taught that Yahweh, the God of Israel, had freely chosen Israel to be his people. This he had done because he loved them and he had demonstrated his love not only by his original choice but also by saving Israel from slavery in Egypt and giving them the land of Palestine to be their home. The defeat of the Egyptians at the Red Sea, and the victories which had gained for Israel her place in Palestine alongside the Canaanites, were all seen as being due to God's support for his people. Yahweh had also shown his love by giving to Israel a law so that they would know how to live in a manner pleasing to him. In response to this love, he looked in return for love from the people to whom he had given so much. That response of love, he made clear, should take the form of loyal obedience to his law.

THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE DEUTERONOMISTS

The deuteronomists were not interested in political and economic issues, in conquests and foreign alliances, in building and trade, except in so far as these things were related to and illustrated their own theological interests. Consequently their evaluation of kings and events must seem strange to us. A king who repaired or reformed the temple merited more attention in their eyes than one who gained new territory. For them Israel was first and foremost the covenant people of God to whom God had given the privilege and responsibility of living by his law. That was Israel's purpose and vocation in life. All other interests were secondary, and to the degree in which they could deflect Israel from her primary obligation to her God, they were dangerous and even sinful. So kings who were primarily concerned with political issues were suspect, and when their concerns and policies led to close alliances with neighbouring states and thus opened up the

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people to the influence of the culture and religion of those states, then the kings were looked upon as sinners and enemies both of God and his people. All the kings of Israel, the northern kingdom, from Jeroboam, who led the rebellion against Solomon's son, onwards were condemned. Each one 'did what was wrong in the eyes of the LORD' in that they encouraged their subjects to worship and offer sacrifice at temples other than the temple at Jerusalem. Ahab received particular attention and extra condemnation because his policy of alliance with foreign states was pursued vigorously and successfully, and because it attracted the opposition of the prophet Elijah.

The prophets are portrayed as men of affairs who entered the political arena of their time. They criticized the actions of the kings and always from one simple point of view: that any involvement with neighbouring states must inevitably lead to a blurring of the distinctive community life of Israel and therefore, to a lessening of the response of obedience to God's law which was the true measure of Israel's love for her God. To the comment that it is the business of kings to ensure the stability of their kingdoms by diplomatic and other means, the prophets offered one simple answer of which the classic statement is to be found in the exchanges described between King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah: 'I will shield this city to deliver it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David' (19: 34; see the whole of 19: 20–34). Israel was God's own people, and so long as she responded with loyal obedience to the law she could look to God to maintain the life of the nation and deliver it from all perils, as he had already done in earlier times.

THE END OF THE TWO KINGDOMS

Such an answer may seem particularly pointless in view of the story which 2 Kings tells. Samaria was destroyed by the armies of the Assyrian emperor, Sargon II, in 722 B.C. and with its destruction Israel ceased to exist. Its territory became one of

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the provinces of the Assyrian Empire. Judah was left from that time as the sole Hebrew kingdom, the one remaining witness to the old traditions. For a time all seemed to be well with her. The Judaeans could confidently assert that God had destroyed the northern kingdom because of its rebellion against the house of David and its refusal to close down its sanctuaries and acknowledge in religious matters the undisputed authority of the temple at Jerusalem. When the Assyrian Empire began to decline and her hold upon Syria and Palestine was relaxed, it seemed as though God was defending his people as in former times. Josiah, who was king of Judah at that time, was able to expand his territory and act more freely than his predecessors had been able to do for a very long time. He may well have thought of himself as a second David, and his reform of the temple was in part at least dictated by nationalist motives. But the empire of Assyria was in a short space of time replaced by the empire of Babylon which simply continued where Assyria had left off. Josiah interfered in the wars between the empires and was defeated and killed in the battle of Megiddo, 609 B.C. After that Judah became an unwilling vassal of the Babylonian Empire. Egypt was continually trying to stir such vassal states into revolt and she had some success with Judah. In 597 B.C. the Babylonians attacked Judah as both a warning and a punishment but the lesson was not learned. The consequence was that in 587 B.C. Jerusalem was destroyed and the kingdom of Judah brought to an end by the Emperor Nebuchadnezzar. Such a story seems to refute absolutely the deuteronomic faith that God can be relied upon to protect his own people.

THE MOTIVE FOR THE WRITING OF THE BOOK

Yet one of the reasons for the writing of Kings was the concern of the deuteronomists to defend their faith and, as they believed, vindicate their God. They did it by the use of another basic tenet of their theology. This was that God punished the

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wicked and rewarded the righteous, and that his rewards and punishments were visible and unambiguous. The rewards were wealth and national prosperity, the punishments defeat, poverty and, ultimately, the destruction of the nation. They applied this doctrine to the history of their people and drew the conclusion that what had happened to the Hebrew kingdoms did not indicate God's inability or unwillingness to protect his people so much as his punishment for their sinfulness. Far from the Assyrians or Babylonians being beyond the power of God, they were in fact the very instrument which he had chosen to enforce his will and teach his lessons (cp. Isa. 10: 5). Their purpose in writing the history of their people in this way was to teach their contemporaries, and generations yet to come, that they should learn lessons from the past; that they should live in loving obedience to God's law, and thus ensure that out of defeat and destruction would come eventually restoration and renewal. For the deuteronomists were convinced that when the people did turn to their God in loving obedience he would forgive them and restore their fortunes.

THE DEUTERONOMIC HISTORY

Kings was written then not out of despair, but in confidence and hope. It forms the last part of the story of the rise and fall of the kingdoms, a story which is begun in the book of Joshua and continued in Judges, Samuel and Kings. This group of books has been called the Deuteronomic History. It was compiled probably towards the end of the exile to set before the people the lesson they should learn from their present plight and the sins of their forefathers. It was a call for repentance and for faith in God. For faith that a restoration would come: for repentance so that when it did come, the pattern of the earlier history would not be repeated. We do not know the exact date at which Kings was written. The last event which it records is the release of the former King Jehoiachin from his Babylonian prison: 25: 27-30. This probably took place in