CHAPTER 1

Toward the Theology of the Book of Kings

The book of Kings begins in the palace of Jerusalem with the aged founder of Israel's greatest dynasty but ends in the palace of Babylon with the last remnant of that once-great dynasty in captivity at the mercy of a foreign potentate. In between is a vast narrative that explains how such a staggering displacement came to pass, recounting the monarchic story with its architectural highs and syncretistic lows, its prophetic oracles and attempts at reform, but also its latent compromises and ill-fated alliances that culminate in the destruction of Jerusalem and the era of the Babylonian exile. By the end of the story, which spans four centuries of historical time and contains hundreds of characters, both the Davidic monarchy and the Jerusalem temple are in ruins, inviting reflection on the provisional nature of both even as the nation contemplates its uncertain future. Despite its sprawling diversity – or perhaps because of it – Kings is a repository of theological themes and images, including temple, dynasty, kingdom, prophecy, foreign invasion and exile. Appreciating the nuances and sophistication of the story, my study presents a theological reading of Kings in its sequential unfolding. Among the key problems faced by the interpreter is how to reconcile what is referred to as "the essential beneficence of God" – manifested in ways such as the promise to the Davidic house, the election of

Zion, and the establishment of the temple – with the dismantling of those same structures and institutions in the Babylonian invasion of 2 Kings 25.[1] Building on a number of useful studies by recent scholars who deploy various methodological approaches, this book will navigate the theological complexities of Kings and present the reader with questions and interpretive options as I proceed through each major section of the text.

There are three parts to this opening chapter. The first outlines some of the central theological plot movements in the book of Kings and raises a number of the questions that will be explored in due course. George Steiner has famously said, "It is not the literal past that rules us, save, possibly, in a biological sense. It is images of the past. These are often as highly structured and selective as myths. Images and symbolic constructs of the past are imprinted, almost in the manner of genetic information, on our sensibility."[2] How are primary theological images dramatized in the book of Kings, and how might a contemporary reader access the narrative's theological tapestry? In order to chart our course for this book, a short synopsis of each chapter is provided, starting in the court of Jerusalem at the outset of 1 Kings and ending in the prison of Babylon as 2 Kings moves to a close. The second part of this introductory chapter surveys some recent attempts to explore the theology of Kings. As a point of entry, the works of three scholars are briefly canvassed in order to provide a sample of approaches and lay a foundation for my own foray. To that end, it is suggested that Choon Leong Seow,

[1] Gregory Mobley, "1 and 2 Kings," in *Theological Bible Commentary*, ed. Gail R. O'Day and David L. Petersen (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 119–43 (124).

[2] George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes towards the Redefinition of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971), 3.

Gregory Mobley and Lissa Wray Beal are useful interlocutors to help us access the theology of Kings and locate our study within the current scholarly milieu. The third part of the chapter addresses the position of Kings in the canon of scripture. While it is appropriate to speak of the *book* of Kings following Hebrew tradition – with the separation into two books occurring in the fourfold Greek version of Samuel–Kings called "Reigns" or "Kingdoms" – the story of Kings is surely not meant to be read in isolation.[3] As part of a larger narrative continuum, Kings assumes the material that precedes and acts as the final installment of Israel's royal history, traditionally labeled as the "Former Prophets." Since the mid-twentieth century, scholars have been probing the idea of a Deuteronomistic History, positing that Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings form an epic narrative informed by the teaching of Deuteronomy. Since such a concept would carry considerable theological significance, our introductory chapter concludes with a short review of scholarship on this topic and the position I assume for the remainder of this study.

CHARTING THE THEOLOGICAL PLOT

Although it continues the story of 2 Samuel, the opening section of 1 Kings also carries a sense of new beginning with a leadership transition and change in regime. Chapter 2 in this book, "Dynasty and Succession," analyzes the intricate narrative of Solomon's accession and the early consolidation of his empire. The theme

[3] J. A. Montgomery and H. S. Gehman, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1951), 1–3.

of succession is foregrounded in the first scenes, as the aged David is unable to "be in heat" and therefore will sire no further contenders to the throne. Enter Adonijah, the oldest surviving son of David, who gathers allies and hosts a coronation party at En Rogel, only to have his straight path to the scepter intercepted by Nathan and Bathsheba. Due to their maneuverings, Solomon is crowned at the Gihon spring with its echoes of Eden, as suddenly David claims to have earlier sworn an oath about Solomon's future accession. In the midst of this apparent sordidness, how is a theology of succession articulated in this story, and how should the reader understand the Davidic dynasty for the remainder of the book of Kings? Even as such questions linger, David's last words to Solomon in 1 Kings 2 refer to a conditional dynasty, further complicating the matter. More practically, David also advises his successor to deal with his opponents, which happens with ruthless efficiency; the reader witnesses the death of Adonijah, the banishment of Abiathar the priest, the end of Joab, and the demise of Shimei from Benjamin. There is a seeming absence of God in this bloodshed, causing one to ask how God's involvement can be discerned in the midst of human machinations, or what Terence Fretheim refers to as the tension between "divine purpose and human intrigue."[4] This chapter includes some concluding reflections on the promise to David: How is the promise interpreted elsewhere in Kings and more broadly in biblical literature, and how might the contemporary reader make sense of this dynamic promise and its several iterations?

The material legacy of Solomon's reign can be measured by two structures: the palace of Jerusalem and, in close spatial proximity,

[4] Terence E. Fretheim, *First and Second Kings* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 27.

the temple. Chapter 3, "Palace and Temple," surveys the narrative of 1 Kings 3–10 and offers an analysis of the burgeoning royal administration and the increasingly complex figure of the monarch. In 1 Kings 3, Solomon is granted the gift of wisdom, and on one level, he certainly appears to use this gift in a publicly beneficial way. But it gradually appears that Solomon's activities are at odds with Deuteronomy 17, the charter text that curtails the accumulation of wives, gold and horses (each of which Solomon has in peerless abundance). Indeed, the elaborate palace in Jerusalem is named "the House of the Forest of Lebanon," though determining whether this title is a compliment or a criticism requires some close scrutiny. The theology of the temple and its sacred space occupies significant attention in this chapter, along with a discussion of how the temple "represented a creation story written in architecture."[5] On the one hand, the construction of the temple has to be viewed as a triumph for the king, but on the other hand, even as early as the temple's prayer of dedication (1 Kings 8), there are strong hints of its eventual ruination. Moreover, the chronological notice of 1 Kgs 6:1 needs to be considered: "Four hundred and eighty years after the Israelites came out from the land of Egypt, in the month of Ziv (that is, the second month) of the fourth year of Solomon's reign, he built the house of the LORD." The conflation of two different calendars – the Canaanite agricultural month of Ziv and the Babylonian reckoning of the second month – strongly suggests that the temple is built at roughly the midpoint between the exodus from past captivity in Egypt and the future captivity in Babylon, reminding the audience that much is at stake at this juncture in the narrative. Several issues raised in this chapter will need to be

[5] Mobley, "1 and 2 Kings," 128.

briefly addressed later in this study: in view of the book of Kings as a whole, what theological themes are signaled about the temple early in the story, and how do such themes play out across various sectors of the book? Furthermore, although it is outside my scope here, other researchers may be interested in pursuing the question of how the various New Testament writers understand the theology of the temple, and how present-day readers might appreciate such nuances.

Solomon's empire undoubtedly glitters with a cosmopolitan court and gold in abundance, but in the end, it has all the stability of a house of cards. Chapter 4, "Kingdom and Division," turns to the division of the kingdom and its immediate aftermath in 1 Kings 11–16. Across the valley from the Jerusalem temple – atop the Mount of Olives – Solomon built installations for Molech and Chemosh, and the penalty for his divided heart is a divided kingdom in the days of his son. Rehoboam is not presented as a competent leader in 1 Kings 12, but the odds were impossibly stacked against him: "Thus the king did not listen to the people, for this twist was from the LORD, in order to establish his word that he spoke by means of Ahijah of Shiloh to Jeroboam son of Nebat" (12:15). Such a phenomenon is often referred to as *dual causality*, and numerous interpreters have delved into the relationship between divine foreknowledge and human freedom that is inscribed in the story of division. As the judgment passed on Solomon is inherited by Rehoboam, there are generous promises apportioned to the inaugural king of the northern tribes, Jeroboam. Yet even as Jeroboam is offered the chance to become a new David, there is a conditional clause attached to his reign. Consequently, Jeroboam's challenge will match that of Israel as a people, faced with "the divine demand to abandon their attempt at making their existence secure and to turn toward God in radical

insecurity or faith."[6] In Jeroboam's case, followed soon by most of the northern constituency and its parade of kings and transitory dynasties, the step of radical faith is not taken; instead, there are aggressive and increasingly banal attempts to attain other kinds of material security. Thus, at several moments in 1 Kings 14–15, there is a mention of divine anger, and in this chapter we consider how God's anger is represented as the story unfolds. Moreover, as the reader transitions to the next phase of the narrative – after reading the outlandish sequence in 1 Kings 16 that features the drunkenness of Elah, the incendiary self-destruction of Zimri, and the understated rise of Omri – the reader might ask how God is at work in the various political structures of north and south. Amid the instability both in this installment of the story and elsewhere in Kings, is there any theological wisdom conveyed whereby readers across the ages might sense the presence of God in a world of violence and seeming chaos?

The early days of the divided kingdom included several influential prophets, such as Ahijah of Shiloh announcing the rise and fall of Jeroboam's dynasty or Jehu son of Hanani in 1 Kings 16 proclaiming the end of Baasha's fleeting kingdom. But these characters pale in comparison to the towering figures of Elijah and his successor Elisha in the lengthy middle portion of the book of Kings, with its disproportionate interest in the northern capital city of Samaria. Chapter 5 of this study, "Prophets and Apostasy," covers a significant amount of material (1 Kings 17–2 Kings 8), and not surprisingly, an array of theological issues confronts the reader on this textual canvas. How do these prophets confront the kings

[6] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 11.

from the house of Omri? In light of the allure of Baal worship, why is so much prophetic activity centered around works of healing, providing food, engaging with every conceivable level of society, and a bevy of anonymous characters, and how is it that a single prophet cannot be apprehended, even by entire military forces? Why are there so many memorable events, ranging from mountaintop experiences of Mount Carmel and Mount Horeb to fiery chariots and rapacious she-bears? Is there a shared set of themes in the Elijah–Elisha narratives such as a resistance to tyranny, overcoming the seductiveness of state-sponsored fertility religions, and a refusal to accommodate despite myriad pressures to conform? Alongside these two dominant prophets is a startling diversity of other kinds of characters and events, and among the various episodes considered here are 1 Kings 20 – the war with Ben Hadad king of Damascus and its remarkable blend of humor and theological subtlety – and 2 Kings 5, the healing of Naaman the Syrian military commander. In light of Naaman's cleansing from leprosy, on the threshold of deeper and more extensive campaigns from foreign armies at this stage in the divided kingdom, what is the theology of "outsiders" that emerges in the narrative?[7] In these seemingly disparate prophetic episodes, can Christian readers discern any lineaments of the later gospel narratives in the New Testament that are foreshadowed?

Numerous prophets confronted and condemned the house of Omri, but it is finally terminated in 2 Kings 9 by the northern army captain Jehu son of Nimshi. Chapter 6, "Upheaval and Reprieve," analyzes the turbulent material of 2 Kings 9–19, beginning with Jehu's purge and continuing until the Assyrian invasion

[7] See further Frank Anthony Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider: Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

that decimates northern Israel and nearly defeats Judah except for a miraculous stay of execution at the eleventh hour. Though successfully dethroning the Omrides, Jehu's own dynasty fares little better, lasting only four generations despite his strike at the heart of the infrastructure of northern Baal worship. Meanwhile, the southern kingdom is plagued by Athaliah – daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, and queen of Judah through intermarriage – who, upon the death of her son (also at the hands of Jehu) assumes control of the south until she is unseated in an uprising led by Jehoiada the priest in 2 Kings 11. In this episode, the Davidic dynasty hangs on by a thread – the infant Joash is hidden in the temple, only to be unveiled seven years later to a surprised Athaliah – and becomes an ominous foreshadowing of the final verses of Kings. Athaliah's reign of terror acts as a segue to a highly unstable epoch; 2 Kings 13–16 is marked by internal disruptions and frantic alliances with other nations as the Assyrian threat casts an intimidating shadow. Threat becomes reality with the destruction of the northern kingdom and its capital city of Samaria, necessitating the question: Why does God allow the Assyrian destruction of Israel? In 2 Kings 18, the Assyrian field commander is confident that Jerusalem will experience the same fate, but in response to Hezekiah's prayer, a dramatic oracle is delivered by the prophet Isaiah: "By the way that he came, by the same he shall return; he shall not come into this city, says the LORD. For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David." The concluding section of this chapter includes reflection on this theology of reprieve and the efficacy of prayer, as well as the "inviolability of Zion" that will be sorely tested in the last installment of Judah's history.

The penultimate chapter of this book, "Demolition and Exile," turns to 2 Kings 20–25. After the careers of Hezekiah and

Manasseh, three other areas of the text are studied. First, Josiah's reform – anticipated even as early as 1 Kings 13 in the strange episode of the old prophet of Bethel – is given consideration, including as it does the book of the law, the eradication of high places and alternative installations, and the celebration of the Passover. However, these comprehensive reforms are not enough to offset the increasing certainty of Jerusalem's downfall. Second, the invasion of Babylon and a theology of exile is explored in this chapter, drawing together several important threads from this climactic moment in the narrative. Here, an idea of David Noel Freedman will be assayed briefly: "Babylon may have been where the dreams ended, but it is also where they could begin, and they would one day begin again. The use of the word 'Chaldeans' (Hebrew *Kasdim*), which in the Primary History is restricted to Genesis and 2 Kings (Gn 11:28, 31; 2 Kgs 24:2, 25:4 passim), reinforces the view that the opening and closing are carefully fitted together to reveal the end from the beginning, and to compel the thoughtful reader to acknowledge that the seeds were planted at the beginning and the fruits were revealed at the end."[8] Third, the end of 2 Kings 25 merits attention, as the imprisoned Jehoiachin – the last representative of the Davidic dynasty – is granted parole by the king of Babylon. Perhaps removal of his prison clothes (2 Kgs 25:29) returns us to the image of David covered "with clothes" in the opening moments of the story, but are there any other allusions in the final moments of the story that might outfit the reader with cautious optimism, even in the midst of catastrophe?

[8] David Noel Freedman, *The Unity of the Hebrew Bible* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 9.