

INTRODUCTION

The purpose or kerygma of the book of Kings¹ has proven an enduring puzzle for modern biblical scholars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While on its surface the book seems to chart the story of Israel from the end of David's reign down to the Babylonian Exile, a closer look reveals a literary structure that is not easily explained if it aims to deliver a straightforward account of Israel's political past. The book's first third (1 Kings 1–16) focuses mainly on events that take place in Jerusalem: Solomon's ascension and his construction of the temple, as well as his faithlessness and the schismatic repercussions that follow. By contrast, the second third (1 Kings 17–2 Kings 8) shows little interest in Judah, recounting instead the exploits of several northern prophets, especially Elijah and Elisha. Not only that, but these narratives – while set within the context of Omride rule – frequently depict prophetic activities that make limited reference to Israel's political fortunes (e.g. 1 Kings 17, 19; 2 Kings 2, 4). Again, by contrast, the remaining third (2 Kings 9–25) describes the demise of the Northern Kingdom and then patiently applies a similar exilic fate to the South, with an emphasis on Judean monarchs in the book's final frames rather than on Israel's wonder-working prophets. Why craft a book of such sprawling, rhetorical complexity, and to what end? Nowhere is this question's difficulty more acutely felt than in exegetical analyses of 2 Kgs 25:27–30, the account of Jehoiachin's release from prison in Babylon that concludes the book. M. Noth (in)famously interpreted this passage as a simple epilogue to a saga

¹ Because 1 and 2 Kings are integrally linked by a common storyline and shared characters, and because this study deals with material that spans both books, it will treat the “book of Kings” as a singular entity, leaving a discussion of the canonical distinction between its first and second volumes for another day.

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of “progressive decay,” expressing no hope for Israel’s future.² Conversely, G. von Rad regarded it as an important affirmation that Yhwh would remain faithful to David’s line, which “has not come to an irrevocable end.”³ Optimistic horizon or pessimistic conclusion? Davidic promise or Davidic end? *Hope* at the conclusion of Kings? Or only despair?

One’s perspective on this issue will depend in part on one’s view of the book’s compositional history and resulting literary form, as well as the hermeneutic lens or lenses applied toward its interpretation. The contours of this discussion are firmly entrenched in the field, familiar to anyone who has examined the Deuteronomistic History (DtrH) hypothesis in depth. Noth viewed the book of Kings as the creation of an exilic author who recrafted his or her sources into an anti-Davidic, historical theodicy, punctuated by speeches that explained its didactic purpose to the reader. Most interpreters since Noth have found this scheme too simple, and so in response have developed two main hypotheses aimed at better explaining the text’s literary complexity. On one hand, R. Smend and his students (the Göttingen school) accepted an exilic context for the DtrH’s composition, but nuanced Noth’s view of its authorship by hypothesizing several redactional layers motivated by different ideological and theological interests.⁴ Thus, a distinct trajectory of thought within Deuteronomistic studies sees the book of Kings as a fundamentally exilic and/or postexilic work, even among scholars who regard its rhetorical purpose differently than had Noth.⁵ On the other hand,

² Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, JSOTSup 15 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 66, 97–9.

³ Gerhard von Rad, “The Deuteronomic Theology of History in 1 and 2 Kings,” in *From Genesis to Chronicles: Explorations Old Testament Theology*, edited by K. Hanson, Fortress Classics in Biblical Studies (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 165.

⁴ For example, see Walter Dietrich, *Prophetie und Geschichte: Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerk*, FRLANT 108 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972); Rudolf Smend, *Die Entstehung des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1978); Timo Veijola, *Die ewige Dynastie: David und die Entstehung seiner Dynastie nach der deuteronomistischen Darstellung*, AASF, Ser. B, 193 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia: 1975); Timo Veijola, *Das Königtum in der Beurteilung der deuteronomistischen Historiographie: Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung*, AASF, Ser. B, 198 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1977).

⁵ For example, see Peter R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration: A Study of Hebrew Thought of the Sixth Century B.C.* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 62–83; Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.*, translated by David Green, Studies in Biblical Literature 3 (Leiden; Boston: Brill,

F. Cross and his students emphasized the relative completeness of the DtrH during the preexilic period.⁶ This alternative understands Kings to be pro-Davidic, political propaganda. Just as Noth did not deny that the Deuteronomistic author relied upon preexisting sources, so too Cross did not deny that exilic editors changed the material they inherited. However, Cross's influential model

2004), 271–302; Walter Brueggemann, “The Kerygma of the Deuteronomistic Historian: Gospel for Exiles,” *Int* 22.4 (1968), 387–402; Hans-Detlef Hoffmann, *Reform und Reformen: Untersuchungen zu einem Grundthema der deuteronomistischen Geschichtsschreibung*, ATANT 66 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1980); E. Theodore Mullen, Jr., *Narrative History and Ethnic Boundaries: The Deuteronomistic Historian and the Creation of Israelite National Identity*, SBL Semeia Studies (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993); Brian Peckham, *History and Prophecy History: The Development of Late Judean Literary Traditions*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 518–655; John Van Seters, *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 1983); Hans Walter Wolff, “The Kerygma of the Deuteronomistic Historical Work,” translated by F. C. Prussner, in *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions*, by W. Brueggemann and H. Wolff (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), 83–100.

⁶ Frank Moore Cross, “The Themes of the Book of Kings and the Structure of the Deuteronomistic History,” in *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 274–89. Examples of scholarly works that build on Cross's model, both those that posit a pre-Josianic edition of the DtrH and those that articulate a “hybrid” combination of Cross and Smend, include the following: Antony F. Campbell, *Of Prophets and Kings: A Late Ninth Century Document (1 Samuel 1–2 Kings 10)*, CBQMS 17 (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1986); Erik Eynikel, *The Reform of King Josiah and the Composition of the Deuteronomistic History*, OTS 33 (Leiden; New York; Cologne: Brill, 1996); Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Exile and Biblical Narrative: The Formation of the Deuteronomistic and Priestly Works*, HSM 22 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981); Jeffrey C. Geoghegan, “‘Until This Day and the Preexilic Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History,” *JBL* 122.2 (2003), 201–27; Gary N. Knoppers, *Two Nations under God: The Deuteronomistic History of Solomon and the Dual Monarchies*, 2 vols., HSM 52–3 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993, 1994); Richard H. Lowery, *The Reforming Kings: Cult and Society in First Temple Judah*, JSOTSup 120 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991); Andrew D. H. Mayes, *The Story of Israel between Settlement and Exile: A Redactional Study of the Deuteronomistic History* (London: SCM Press, 1983); Richard D. Nelson, *The Double Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History*, JSOTSup 18 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981); Mark A. O'Brien, *The Deuteronomistic History Hypothesis: A Reassessment*, OBO 92 (Freiburg, Switzerland: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989); Iain W. Provan, *Hezekiah and the Books of Kings: A Contribution to the Debate about the Composition of the Deuteronomistic History* (Berlin; New York: de Gruyter, 1988); Marvin A. Sweeney, *King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Helga Weippert, “Die ‘deuteronomistischen’ Beurteilungen der Könige von Israel und Juda und das Problem der Redaktion der Königsbücher,” *Bib* 53.3 (1972), 301–39; Helga Weippert, “Geschichten und Geschichte: Verheissung und Erfüllung im deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerk,” in *Congress Volume: Leuven, 1989*, edited by J. Emerton, VTSup 43 (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 116–31.

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characterized such alterations as efforts to update the main text rather than to rewrite it from scratch – even allowing that such “retouching” could introduce radically new theological claims (and thus irresolvable tensions) into the text’s final form.

Taken together, both interpretive models (including the many modifications, elaborations, and syntheses they have spawned) typify an epistemologically modern and methodologically historicist approach to the book of Kings. Both reconstruct a particular edition of Kings that is thought to reflect certain circumstances in Israel’s political history, circumstances that are then enlisted to explain the book’s message. Biblical scholars of this persuasion often express disagreement regarding a passage’s meaning while maintaining similar views on its present form; they simply differ as to which proto-text deserves the most press among contemporary interpreters. For example, even Cross argues that in the DtrH’s exilic edition, “the original theme of hope is overwritten and contradicted,”⁷ which approaches his own assessment of Noth’s view that the DtrH constitutes a “proclamation of unrelieved and irreversible doom.”⁸ In short, the pursuit of authorial intent continues to frame the scholarly conversation around Kings’ meaning in the present day.

One important repercussion of the modern-historicist procedure sketched above is a scholarly tendency to push the Elijah/Elisha narratives further and further from view. For example, the works of G. Auld, S. McKenzie, R. Person, and T. Römer suggest that Kings did not originally contain the Elijah/Elisha material, but rather absorbed it sometime after the main historical narrative had already been constructed.⁹ Moreover, if scholars are correct that the

⁷ Cross, “The Themes of the Book of Kings,” 288.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 275. S. McKenzie makes a similar point regarding Cross (Steven L. McKenzie, *The Chronicler’s Use of the Deuteronomistic History*, HSM 33 [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985], 7).

⁹ See A. Graeme Auld, *Kings without Privilege: David and Moses in the Story of the Bible’s Kings* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994); Reinhard G. Kratz, *The Composition of the Narrative Books of the Old Testament*, translated by John Bowden (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2005); Steven L. McKenzie, *The Trouble with Kings: The Composition of the Book of Kings in the Deuteronomistic History*, VTSup 42 (Leiden; New York; Copenhagen; Cologne: Brill, 1991); Raymond F. Person, Jr., “The Deuteronomistic History and the Books of Chronicles: Contemporary Competing Historiographies,” in *Reflection and Refraction: Studies in Biblical Historiography in Honour of A. Graeme Auld*, edited by R. Rezetko, T. Lim, and W. Aucker, VTSup 113 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007), 315–36; Alexander Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories: The Narratives about the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible: Their Literary Types and History* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988); Thomas C. Römer, *The So-called Deuteronomistic*

presentation of a political storyline (i.e. the checkered history of the Davidic monarchy) constitutes the book's basic scaffolding and *raison d'être*, then the Elijah/Elisha stories, even if based on preexilic sources, seem to represent unwelcome surds that must be bracketed if the purpose of the text is to be ascertained. At the same time, our field has seen no shortage of monographs that delve into the text's presentation of these two prophetic characters.¹⁰ Yet the majority of such investigations also tend to quarantine them from the larger narrative arc in which they are housed. Biblical scholarship has failed – strikingly – to offer a compelling reason why the Elijah/Elisha narratives should have been added to Kings when this material easily could have been gathered into a volume of its own. To put a fine point on it, what does a miraculous conspiracy of ravens

History: A Sociological, Historical, and Literary Introduction (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2007).

¹⁰ Examples cited below include both scholarly and popular/inspirational literature. See Rainer Albertz, *Elia: Ein feuriger Kämpfer für Gott*, *Biblische Gestalten* 13 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006); W. Brian Aucker, "Putting Elisha in His Place: Genre, Coherence, and Narrative Function in 2 Kings 2–8" (PhD dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2001); Wesley J. Bergen, *Elisha and the End of Prophetism*, JSOTSup 286 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); Keith Bodner, *Elisha's Profile in the Book of Kings: The Double Agent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Leah Bronner, *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha: As Polemics against Baal Worship*, *Pretoria Oriental Series* 6 (Leiden: Brill: 1968); John C. Butler, *Elijah: The Prophet of Confrontation*, *Bible Biography Series* 3 (Clinton, IA: LBC, 1994); Havilah Dharamraj, *A Prophet Like Moses? A Narrative-Theological Reading of the Elijah Stories*, *Paternoster Biblical Monographs* (Milton Keynes, England; Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster Press, 2011); Raymond B. Dillard, *Faith in the Face of Apostasy: The Gospel according to Elijah and Elisha* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999); Roger Ellsworth, *The Story of Elijah: Standing for God* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994); Russell Inman Gregory, "Elijah's Story under Scrutiny: A Literary-Critical Analysis of 1 Kings 17–19" (PhD dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1983); Hermann Gunkel, *Elijah, Yahweh, and Baal*, edited and translated by K. C. Hanson (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014); Alan J. Hauser and Russell Gregory, *From Carmel to Horeb: Elijah in Crisis*, JSOTSup 85; BLS 19 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990); Roy L. Heller, *The Characters of Elijah and Elisha and the Deuteronomic Evaluation of Prophecy: Miracles and Manipulation*, LHBOTS 671 (London; New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018); Howard G. Hendricks, *Elijah: Confrontation, Conflict, Crisis* (Chicago: Moody, 1972); W. Moelwyn Merchant, *Fire from the Heights*, *Princeton Theological Monograph Series* 27 (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1991); Rick D. Moore, *God Saves: Lessons from the Elisha Stories*, JSOTSup 95 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990); Ray Pritchard, *Fire and Rain: The Wild-Hearted Faith of Elijah* (Nashville: B&H, 2007); David Roper, *Elijah: A Man Like Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 1997); Charles R. Swindoll, *Elijah: A Man of Heroism and Humility* (Nashville: Word, 2000); M. B. van't Veer, *My God Is Yahweh: Elijah and Ahab in an Age of Apostasy*, translated by Theodore Plantinga (St. Catharines, Ontario: Paideia, 1980); Jerome T. Walsh, "The Elijah Cycle: A Synchronic Approach" (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1982).

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(1 Kgs 17:2-6) have to do with the ultimate fate of David's line (2 Kgs 25:27-30)? Why inject Kings with the narrative complexity it now contains?

A hermeneutically innovative approach to this question is needed. Following B. Childs, M. Fishbane, and others, I assume that Kings is a text-in-tradition, a book that has undergone inner-biblical interpretation and one that also has helped to generate the religious traditions that maintain its scriptural status. As Childs and his students have demonstrated, a canonical approach is by no means ahistorical; rather, it recognizes that biblical texts represent a spectrum of interrelated, compositional dates, and so offers a corrective to notions of originality that characterize modern-historicist reading.¹¹ Additionally, this study applies an agrarian hermeneutic to the book of Kings. Inspired by the thought and praxis of contemporary agrarians such as W. Berry, this holistic reading strategy takes its direction from a way of life that perceives reality as integrated, emplaced experiences rather than as disembodied data. It therefore constitutes a lateral move outside the modern knowledge paradigm with its proclivity to develop inflexible epistemological categories.¹² As a result, an agrarian hermeneutic helps readers to recognize the value of lexical and conceptual associations that make up biblical intratexts – especially as these associations pertain to land, bodies, and place – and then (in the case of Kings) to interpret those associations in light of the book's presentation of Israel's past.

My inquiry will focus on 1 Kings 17–2 Kings 2, the Elijah narratives positioned at the heart of the book. I aim to show how an agrarian hermeneutic, undertaken from within a canonical approach to Kings, offers fruitful, new insights on the kerygmatic contribution that this material makes to the overall text. Placed in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which is governed by rulers who maintain Jeroboam's restriction on worship in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 12:27-28), these prophetic stories portray Yhwh's life-restoring power under circumstances that pre-enact the removal of the Davidic monarchy

¹¹ See Stephen B. Chapman, "Brevard Childs as a Historical Critic: Divine Concession and the Unity of the Canon," in *The Bible as Christian Scripture: The Work of Brevard S. Childs*, edited by C. Seitz and K. Richards, SBL Biblical Scholarship in North America 25 (Atlanta: SBL, 2013), 63–83.

¹² See Daniel J. D. Stulac, *History and Hope: The Agrarian Wisdom of Isaiah* 28–35, *Siphrut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures* 24 (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2018), 7–32.

and Solomonic temple – precisely the situation in which the book of Kings resolves (2 Kings 25). The Elijah narratives resolutely declare that Yhwh maintains an interest in Israel’s life and land even under such conditions; in so doing, they contribute to a “life typology” in Kings that signals hope for David’s (and thus Israel’s) future in the open-ended aftermath of destruction.

Book Overview

Chapter 1, “Solving for Pattern,”¹³ addresses five topics preliminary to the exegetical portions of this study: Kings’ compositional history, genre (especially in light of comparisons to Greek historiography), and rhetorical purpose, as well as a canonical approach to Kings and an agrarian reading strategy applied to Kings. As opposed to either factual history or fictional story, I argue that Kings is best described as a scripture directed at its readers’ theological imaginations. This observation suggests the validity of approaching the book from a canonical frame of reference, where its origins, shaping, and reception are understood to sit within a single field of compositional activity. Finally, Chapter 1 describes an agrarian hermeneutic as one reading strategy especially compatible with a canonical approach to the Bible at large.

Chapter 2, “The Body and the Earth (1 Kings 17–19),” presents a detailed study of the first major leg in the Elijah cycle in relation to its immediate context, 1 Kings 12–16. I begin by observing that Elijah functions as a theological icon rather than as a complete psyche on par with the protagonists of modern histories and novels. An agrarian hermeneutic applied to this same material illumines the text’s holistic interest in physiological healing (1 Kings 17), agroecological renewal (1 Kings 18), and social health (1 Kings 19). As a result, Elijah the Tishbite emerges as the prototypical ancestor of Yhwh’s preserved remnant, a prophetic community that the implied reader, too, is encouraged to join. In contrast to the political and theological disaster that the larger book of Kings narrates, 1 Kings 17–19 suggests that Yhwh raises the dead in multiple dimensions.

Chapter 3, “A Native Hill (1 Kings 20–22),” examines three progressively related chapters whose main character is Ahab, not Elijah, and thus whose connection with the Elijah narratives (or lack

¹³ This study takes its chapter titles from books and essays by W. Berry, the foremost inspiration behind the formulation of an agrarian hermeneutic.

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thereof) has attracted much scholarly discussion. I demonstrate that an agrarian hermeneutic generates new insight on the unit's rhetorical coherence alongside 1 Kings 17–19. In contrast to Elijah's theological submission to and physiological dependence on Yhwh, 1 Kings 20–22 dramatizes Ahab's corresponding theological autonomy from Yhwh, leading to the material loss of life and land. Ahab's story – interwoven with Elijah's (see 1 Kings 21) but also remaining separate from it (1 Kings 20 and 22) – therefore pre-enacts the Exile in which the book of Kings resolves.

Chapter 4, “Life Is a Miracle (2 Kings 1–8),” focuses on Elijah's immortality, the doubling of his spirit, and Elisha's role as Elijah's prophetic heir in the narratives to follow. On paradigm with 1 Kings 17–19, the Elisha narratives depict Yhwh's renewal of Israel's land and people together. Moreover, these stories suggest that Elijah's paradigmatic vitality – even in the prophet's physical absence – outstrips the theological catastrophe (1 Kings 20–22) with which it contrasts. Thus, as a rhetorical extension of the prophet's non-death portrayed in 2 Kings 1–2, 2 Kings 3–8 communicates a hope for Israel that will prove crucial to the book's overall message.

Finally, Chapter 5, “The Long-Legged House,” describes the rhetorical and theological relationship between the Elijah/Elisha narratives and the greater book of Kings, both the Solomon stories on one hand (1 Kings 1–11) and the episodes dealing with Israel's and Judah's political demise on the other (2 Kings 9–25). First, I argue that Elijah and Elisha become the “hereditary carriers” of two theological concepts introduced to the book through Solomon: the hope that children might surpass their ancestors in life-giving wisdom and that the temple might provide a durable paradigm through which to imagine Yhwh's ongoing care for Israel's land and people together. In this sense, Elijah and Elisha “prophetize” the Davidic promise of 2 Samuel 7, showing that Yhwh responds to sin with a power capable of reversing even death itself. Second, I maintain that a series of Davidic kings – Joash, Hezekiah, and Josiah – “re-royalize” the two prophets' characteristic acts of resurrection and other forms of life preservation as depicted in 1 Kings 17–2 Kings 8. Because Elijah functions as their typological ancestor, these prophet-kings become the seeds through which Israel's redemption after catastrophe might be imagined. In this way, David's dynasty – which survives the Babylonian destruction – embodies the remnant community that Yhwh generates through Elijah and into which the reader is welcomed.

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In sum, the Elijah narratives prove to be an indispensable part of the canonical scripture we now call 1 and 2 Kings. For the implied reader of this book, the despair that an uncritically modern hermeneutic tends to discover in it tells a truncated version of the story at best. *Hope* is on the horizon. Hope for David, hope for Israel, and hope for readers who submit themselves to the book's prophetic message of life.