INTRODUCTION

The purpose or kerygma of the book of Kings 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

\[1 \text{ Because 1 and 2 Kings are integrally linked by a common storyline and shared characters, and because this study deals with material that spans both books, it will treat the “book of Kings” as a singular entity, leaving a discussion of the canonical distinction between its first and second volumes for another day.} \]
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of “progressive decay,” expressing no hope for Israel’s future. 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.” 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. 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.


F. Cross and his students emphasized the relative completeness of the DtrH during the preexilic period. 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


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,” which approaches his own assessment of Noth’s view that the DtrH constitutes a “proclamation of unrelieved and irreversible doom.” 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. Moreover, if scholars are correct that the

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 materi-

al 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

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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. 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. 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


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,” 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 illuminates the text’s holistic interest in physiological healing (1 Kings 17), agroe-cological 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.
thereof) has attracted much scholarly discussion. I demonstrate that
an agrarian hermeneutic generates new insight on the unit’s rhet-
orical 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 auton-
omy 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 “propheticize”
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 resur-
rection 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.
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.