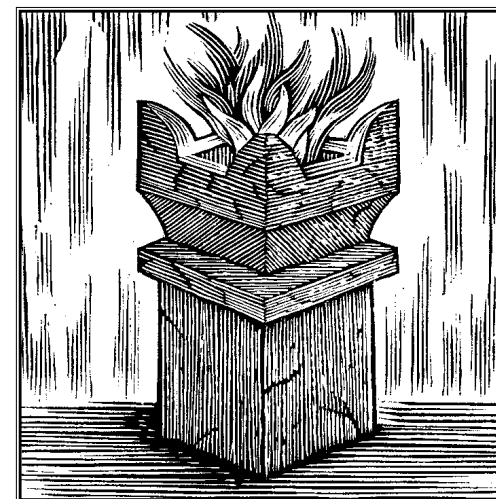


1 & 2 KINGS

THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY



**STEPHEN B.
DAWES**

A BIBLE COMMENTARY FOR EVERY DAY

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PBC 1 & 2 KINGS: INTRODUCTION

An old, old story

This collection of ancient tales, adding up to a story of failure and disappointment, was a message for the present and the future of the people of God. Whenever and wherever they were first told, they appear where they do in the Hebrew Bible as part of a longer tragedy. The books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings tell the story of the people of Israel from a bright beginning on the wrong side of the Jordan River into and then out of the promised land, and away to exile in Babylon in 587BC. This tragic story is followed by four explanations (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve Minor Prophets) which repeat the same message: the people of Israel are the people of God and the tragedy is that their misfortune is of their own making. The theme of the story and the message of the explanation are the same: they have brought the catastrophe of the exile upon themselves by their disobedience and wrongdoing.

This message becomes clearer and clearer as we read through 1 and 2 Kings. In 722BC the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom, Israel, and deported its people. 2 Kings 17:7–8 explains that tragedy like this:

This occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They had worshipped other gods and walked in the customs of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had introduced.

2 Kings 24:20 accounts for the catastrophe of 587BC in the same way and in the simplest and starkest of terms: 'Jerusalem and Judah so angered the Lord that he expelled them from his presence.'

But what sort of story is this? Is it history, or fiction, or bits of both or neither? It is traditional among Christians to call the books from Joshua to Nehemiah the 'Historical Books' and, as the story probably began originally with Deuteronomy, to call the one who wove it together the 'Deuteronomic Historian'. 'History' is, however, a misleading word unless we remember that all history, ancient and modern, is not straight reporting but has a message to convey.

1 and 2 Kings is a book with a message—about ‘the meaning of life, the universe and everything’, about God, about faith in God and about faithfulness to God then and now. It is first and foremost a book of theology, of talk about God, which uses a range of types of writing, including ‘history’ and ‘creative storytelling’, to make its point and proclaim its message. It is as if its anonymous writer, numerous editors and those who included it in our Bibles are saying to us, ‘If you have eyes to see, then see!’ That is how I invite you to read 1 and 2 Kings with me.

The text

In this commentary we will read Kings—and I will call it that or the ‘book of Kings’ even though it is in two parts—as we have it in our modern Bibles. The particular version I will use is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), though I will refer occasionally to other modern versions, especially the Revised English Bible (REB), the New International Version (NIV), the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), the Good News Bible (GNB) and the New Jewish Publication Society translation called ‘Tanach’ (NJPS).

Kings covers the period from the death of King David in the tenth century BC to the middle of the exile in Babylon in the sixth. There are several parallel accounts of this period in the Old Testament, the biggest of which is 1 Chronicles 28 to 2 Chronicles 36. Parts of Kings are actually found in the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and these and other prophets operated during the period in question. I shall not often refer to the parallel accounts in these other books and I certainly will not get involved in discussing the frequent differences between Kings and Chronicles in an attempt to explain those differences or decide which is ‘correct’. In this commentary we shall be reading Kings in its final form—simply because that is the book as we have it.

Kings—and the Deuteronomic History of which it is the last part—is and always has been anonymous. Sometimes, therefore, I will simply refer to the author as ‘our writer’ or ‘writers’ but often I will call him (for the writer almost certainly was a man) or them, the ‘Deuteronomic Historian(s)’ or the ‘Deuteronomists’.

Scholars agree that almost all those responsible for the book reaching its final form, whether as original author or authors or as editors and revisers, share the same outlook and theology and belong

to the same party or group in ancient Israel. They call them the ‘Deuteronomists’ because their outlook and theology are found in the book of Deuteronomy. Exactly who they were is not so easy to say. Most scholars identify them as a group who emerged in the northern kingdom (Israel) in the eighth century BC, who were passionate in their belief in the Lord as the one God for Israel who was calling his people into a covenant with himself. When that kingdom was destroyed in 722BC, they moved south to Judah, where their way of looking at things eventually prevailed and their viewpoint became the accepted orthodoxy. Their theology can be summed up in a sentence: The God who has made himself known to Israel as the Lord (‘Yahweh’), calling Israel into being as his particular people and blessing them with the gift of their own land, demands exclusive loyalty and obedience from his chosen people.

A distinctive feature of their approach, particularly noticeable in Judges, is a fourfold cycle of events: the people of Israel disobey God and cease to walk in his ways; they suffer for their disobedience, often through foreign attack or invasion; they turn back to God, who hears and answers their cry for help; they live happily and successfully for a while until they disobey again; and the cycle continues. All of this is expressed in a distinctive vocabulary which features not only in Deuteronomy itself but throughout the books of the Deuteronomic History and in the books of a number of the prophets too, especially Jeremiah. If they began their work in the eighth century, it certainly continued until after the return from exile in the sixth.

Story and plot

The Deuteronomists tell a good story. There is detail and there are dates, but rarely does the story slow down enough for readers to get bogged down in the detail or to have to worry about the dates. It begins with the intrigues which lead to Solomon’s accession to the throne in Jerusalem on the death of David, and then highlights the glories of his building schemes—the Temple and the palace. But there is no adulation of monarchy here. Time and again the story—here by a hint, there directly—points an accusing finger at the king. We follow the division of the kingdom on his death, with a tendency to dwell longer on Israel and the faults of its succeeding dynasties than Judah and its continuing Davidic line. We watch the end of that kingdom, of a nation and its kings who never listened to God’s

prophets or heeded his guidance; and then see the same mistakes repeated, with the same result, a century and a half later in Judah. We notice the constant appearances of prophets who insist on the Deuteronomic line that righteousness is rewarded and sin is punished. We see the way that king after king fails to behave as they should and how the nation, often just as bad, is caught up in the consequences. The end is the destruction of Solomon's glories and the exile of his people, but it's an end with a twist in it.

Kings (as well as Joshua, Judges and Samuel) are primarily books about God, a fact clearly indicated in the title of all these books in the Hebrew Bible, where they are called the 'Former Prophets'. This title does not simply mean that they happen to feature some of the 'former prophets' like Samuel, Nathan, Elijah and Elisha, but that they are books which speak of the will and purpose of God—they convey what God was believed to be saying and doing, and talk about what it means to be God's people. To put it another way, I shall read Kings as a theology book, an anthology of stories told, incidents recounted and conversations shared, not because this is what happened and we are interested in what happened (though it might be and we may be) but so that we and all God's people of yesterday, today and tomorrow might understand what the will and purpose of God is. For me, these books are books about God, his will and his ways—books which give lessons for the people of God in every age and in every place, lessons from the past for the present and the future.

Although Kings is not a history textbook, there are times when I will put dates on particular events or to the reigns of kings. There is, however, a small problem here. Because of the difficulty of working out a chronology of events from the data given in the Old Testament itself, there are two different sets of dates currently in use. For most of the time they do not differ much and they never differ hugely, but anyone who reads Kings in the NJB (New Jerusalem Bible) will notice at several points that I am using the other scheme.

What about the 'nasty bits'?

There are plenty of 'nasty bits' in the story of God and ancient Israel in Kings, and they do not make the book an easy or comfortable read. They focus the general problem of God, the Bible and violence so sharply that some readers reject the story completely as an expression

of attitudes and values which we have now outgrown. Others seem to see no problem with God and his people perpetrating acts of violence then or now, but that frightening observation is another story! It would be easy to dismiss Kings as a collection of barbaric tales from an ancient and barbarous age, but we ought to take the 'nasty bits' in Kings a bit more seriously than that, not least because a moment's thought might make us pause to reflect how anyone in our century could dare to accuse another age or place of barbarism.

Be that as it may, Kings is, of course, a book from its own age which expresses attitudes and values different from ours. That age, for example, was not a 'democratic' one in which government was accountable to the people and where bad governments could be removed and replaced via the ballot box. Thus, what alternative was there to the coup—even a coup as bloody as Jehu's—if things became unbearable? Neither, in that age, was the worship and service of the Lord, the God of Israel, or any other god, the kind of religion that could be divorced from public life and practised as a private hobby for those who liked that sort of thing. Life-and-death issues were involved in religion—Queen Jezebel's faith permitted her to use her royal power to get rid of the peasant Naboth for her own profit, but Elijah's faith drove him to oppose her—and that at least ought to help us to see why the story is told with all the passion that it is.

Suggestions for further reading

Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, New International Biblical Commentary, Hendrickson/Paternoster, 1995.

G.H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings* (2 volumes), the New Century Bible Commentary, Eerdmans, 1984.

A PRAYER

Eternal and generous God, whose gift of the Bible we cherish because it speaks of your great love for us and of your power and will to save us; grant that our study of it may not be spoiled by the callousness and carelessness of our hearts, but that by it we may be moved to penitence, renewed in hope, strengthened for service and, above all, filled with a true knowledge of you.

The RULERS of JUDAH & ISRAEL

The united monarchy

Saul
David
Solomon

The divided kingdoms

Judah		Israel	
Rehoboam	931–916	Jeroboam	932–911
Abijam	916–914		
Asa	914–874	Nadab	911–910
		Baasha	910–887
		Elah	887–886
		Zimri	886
		Omri	886–875
Jehoshaphat	874–850	Ahab	875–854
		Ahaziah	854–853
Jehoram	850–843	Joram	853–842
Ahaziah	843–842		
Athaliah	842–837	Jehu	842–815
Jehoash	836–797	Jehoahaz	815–799
Amaziah	797–769	Joash	799–784
Uzziah (Ahaziah)	769–741	Jeroboam II	784–753
		Zechariah	753–752
		Shallum	752–751
		Menahem	751–742
		Pekahiah	742–741
Jotham	741–734	Pekah	741–730
Ahaz (Jehoahaz)	734–715	Hoshea	730–722
Hezekiah	715–697		
Manasseh	697–642		
Amon	641–640		
Josiah	639–609		
Jehoahaz II	609		
Jehoiakim	609–598		
Jehoiachin	598		
Zedekiah	598–587		

A KING'S OLD AGE

A great king

The great King David is old and frail. The fact that he is 'old and advanced in years' testifies that he has been richly blessed by God, and that phrase invites us to see him on a par with Abraham and Joshua (Genesis 24:1; Joshua 13:1). King David has built the united kingdom of Israel out of struggling and competing tribal groups, given his new nation peace and prosperity and even made a place for it, though a small one, on the international scene. The threat from the Philistines which had dogged the fate of Israel's first king, Saul, from the beginning of his reign to its tragic end, is a thing of the past, destroyed by David (see 1 Samuel 13:2–23; 31:1–13 and 2 Samuel 5:17–25; 8:1). Instead it is Israel which stands tall among the petty kingdoms between the Mediterranean Sea and the great Arabian Desert, albeit because the world powers of Egypt in the south and the Mesopotamian states in the north are too preoccupied with other things to worry too much about it. He rules as God's anointed king in Jerusalem, his own city, the 'City of David', whose capture from the Jebusites had finally rid the promised land of its previous occupants and, in the process, shown David's personal skills as a commander and military tactician (2 Samuel 5:6–10). Only briefly under Solomon will Israel's borders be bigger, and after that they will never reach this extent again, stretching from a hundred miles north of Damascus to the borders of Egypt and from the Mediterranean itself to nearly as far beyond the River Jordan in the east. Israel has arrived at genuine nationhood, and it is David who has brought it there. But in his old age, personal problems loom largest: he can't get warm (v. 1). Worse is to follow: he has lost control of his own family.

A flawed man

His days of greatness are now behind him; but so too, it appears, are the turbulent times. The account of David's reign in 1 Samuel 16 to 2 Kings 2:11 is a strangely frank one. It makes no attempt to disguise—indeed at times it seems to emphasize—that alongside the real greatness of his political and military successes there is a flawed

humanity. David is a victor. He is also a survivor. He has reached old age despite a long military career, and despite personal trauma, family crises and armed coups. But the stories give him little credit for surviving these things because they are quick to point out that it was usually his own folly, wrongdoing or shortcomings which had caused them in the first place. For example, the legacy of abducting and raping Bathsheba (for that is what his crime amounts to) and arranging for her husband to be killed (2 Samuel 11:2–27) is not simply that David grieves when the baby son conceived in that act dies. It is that Bathsheba and her second son, Solomon, are for ever involved in palace intrigues and that Solomon sows seeds which eventually reap the break-up of all that David had achieved. Or again, David might have subdued the Philistines but he couldn't control his own sons (2 Samuel 19:9). Absalom had even forced him to flee from Jerusalem and live in internal exile (2 Samuel 15:14–20:3). But all that too is now past. The man who found what he wanted, and took it when he found it, now has to have a woman found for him, and can do nothing with her even when he is given every opportunity. David's nubile hot-water bottle, though very attractive, is simply that and his nurse; nothing more (v. 4).

But what next?

These opening verses set a scene which is both rather pathetic and not lacking in irony. They introduce us to an aged king, his loyal and caring servants and the beautiful Abishag from the village of Shunem in the plain of Esdraelon. It all looks remarkably innocent, until we remember that old age means the approach of death and that the death of a king raises the question of succession to the throne. There may be, as yet, no mention of God, but there is the beginning of a plot.

FOR MEDITATION

David was a great king and a flawed man.

His achievements show God's high purposes for humanity.

His human fallibility is a picture of our own.

He is a model of all of us—though not a model for us!

TROUBLE AS BEFORE

The calm of the book's opening scene is shattered by verse 5. Adonijah stages a palace coup. Israel is a new nation; its dynastic principles and rules of succession have not yet been established. Adonijah, David's fourth and oldest surviving son (2 Samuel 3:4), sees his father's infirmity and stakes his claim.

A new Absalom?

The full horror of this threat is unfolded in six short phrases. Adonijah 'exalts himself'. He makes his claim—'I will be king'. By now, readers who have been reading the story from the beginning and have just turned over from the story of David's reign in 2 Samuel will be hearing warning bells, and their fears grow when Adonijah backs his claim by a show of power, mustering an unspecified number of chariots and horsemen and fifty 'outrunners'. Here we are reminded of the beginning of Absalom's attempt to become king (2 Samuel 15:1), but Adonijah's coup is backed by military technology not seen in Israel before—cavalry as well as chariots and infantry. Verse 6 can be read in different ways, one which puts blame on Adonijah by saying that his father had never given him any reason to rebel like this, and the other which puts blame on David by saying either that he had never bothered to exercise any proper parental control over his son or that he made no attempt to stop what was happening now. More memories of Absalom are stirred by the fifth phrase, that Adonijah was 'handsome' (see 2 Samuel 14:25), and then the ominous name itself is mentioned in the sixth phrase. Adonijah is Absalom's younger brother. We now know what to expect.

Taking sides

Adonijah is joined by two of David's most loyal leading statesmen. Joab was David's nephew and commander-in-chief (2 Samuel 8:16). He had a long string of victories for David to his credit, and a lifetime of ruthless and dedicated service to David behind him. He was the one who had arranged Uriah's death (2 Samuel 11:14–16), brought about the initial reconciliation between David and Absalom (2 Samuel 14), killed Absalom when he finally rebelled against his

father (2 Samuel 18:14) and then tackled David when he was distraught with grief over Absalom's death (2 Samuel 19:5–7). He was cunning and brutal (see 2 Samuel 20:8–10) but, until now, prepared to do what David ordered even when he believed it to be wrong (2 Samuel 24:1–9). Abiathar, who shared the chief priestly responsibility with Zadok (2 Samuel 8:17), had been with David since David's earliest outlaw days. He had joined him when Saul had killed his family (1 Samuel 22:20–21) and remained loyal to him throughout. We are not told of their motives for joining Adonijah.

The list of non-joiners is longer. First named is Zadok, the other chief priest; then Benaiah, the captain of David's bodyguard (2 Samuel 8:18); the prophet Nathan who had advised David over his hopes to build a temple (2 Samuel 7:1–17) and then dramatically rebuked him over his treatment of Uriah (2 Samuel 12:1–15); and Shimei and Rei about whom nothing is known. David's bodyguard also refuses to side with Adonijah. The split seems to be the 'old guard' versus the 'young bloods'.

The coup

Adonijah offers a lavish sacrifice to mark the launch of his campaign, just as Absalom had done (2 Samuel 15:12). Its location, En-rogel, was a spring in the Kidron valley just outside Jerusalem, and it too has links with Absalom's revolt for it was the place where David's spies waited for news (2 Samuel 17:17). None of the non-joiners are invited and neither is 'his brother Solomon'. With mention of that name and that relationship, the shape of the coming struggle begins to be seen—and not only that, but the shape of the whole of the book of Kings which will tell about kingdoms and loyalties divided and point up the terrible cost. As yet, King David knows nothing of what is going on.

FOR PRAYER

Pray for the leaders of the nations and all who hold political power, that they may seek not to rule but to serve.