Fretheim, Terence E.

First and Second Kings

Westminster Bible Companion


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The Westminster Bible Companion series of study guides to the Bible is written specifically for the laity and seeks "to help the laity of the church read the Bible more clearly and intelligently" (p. ix). Because of this focus, much of the presentation of issues that are debated among scholars is presented as though it were the consensus. This is not intended as a criticism of this volume; rather, it is a notice about the scholarly constrictions an author faces in producing this type of commentary. Fretheim briefly places the books of Kings within the context of the Deuteronomistic History, noting that its composition occurred in two major editorial stages—one pre-exilic, the other exilic. Within this context, the non-specialist might have benefited from a more extensive explanation of why the distinction between "biblical Israel" and "historical Israel" constitutes an "overreaction" on the part of some scholars (p. 10). This observation seems to detract from the presentation of the hortatory nature of the book itself, which Fretheim approaches as "theological literature" (p. 14).

Fretheim identifies three major themes around which the narrative accounts of Kings are structured: apostasy, judgment, and promise. He also emphasizes the role which the prophetic word, both its announcement and its often delayed fulfillment, plays in guiding the development of the materials. He directs the reader's attention to the various ways in which the Davidic Covenant, in tension with the concept of the Mosaic Covenant, is presented throughout the work, thus contributing to the ambiguities that remain at the book's conclusion. Fretheim divides Kings into its major thematic units and provides two types of commentary on Kings. Each section receives a general commentary that addresses the narrative form of the work. In forty-three additional segments, he provides what he calls "theological reflections" on key themes and concerns of the narrative.
Because of my background and training, I will restrict my comments to the commentary portion of the work.

In general, each of the segments of Kings begins with the text of the New Revised Standard Version. This enables the reader to become familiar with the actual biblical text, an important act, since Fretheim correctly notes that "... most people, both within and without the churches, have little knowledge of these stories" (p. 14). Each passage is then followed by a narrative commentary explaining the significance of the passage, in both its literary and historical contexts. Throughout these sections, Fretheim demonstrates how well he has mastered the major modern research pertaining to the books of Kings. His analyses of the ways in which the major themes of the work influence the presentation of the narrative are instructive to students of Kings on many different levels.

Sometimes, at least to this reader, the choice of which texts to present before the commentary portions seems to have been influenced by the "theological reflections" that are presented. Several examples might be illustrative. The biblical text is not presented for the prophetic story of the "man of god" at Bethel (1 Kings 13). This makes both the commentary and the "theological reflection" rather difficult to understand. The same might be said concerning the omission of the biblical texts from 1 Kgs 14:1-15:24 or 2 Kgs 13:1-15:38. The failure to present the biblical description of the reign of Ahaz, a very significant text in the deuteronomistic structure of the book, is a critical omission. Additionally, Fretheim introduces a number of concepts in the commentary that could strengthen the work if developed more fully. The reference to a prophetic guild (p. 114) could have been expanded to provide a broader context for understanding the phenomenon of prophecy in ancient Israel, or the mention of the divine council (p. 124) might have provided the opportunity to provide a cultural context for religious beliefs of Israel in their historical milieu.

It must be emphasized, however, that this volume is not intended as a modern, historical-critical commentary on Kings. It is not intended for a scholarly audience, and will not be found useful by one. For Christian laity interested in understanding Kings from the perspective of one particular Christian tradition, this book may prove quite effective. The non-specialist seeking to understand some of the critical questions associated with the narratives contained in Kings might be better served by selecting one of the works cited in Fretheim's two-page selective bibliography.