Fretheim, Terence E.

First and Second Kings

Westminster Bible Companion


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The stated intention of this series is "to help the laity of the church read the Bible more clearly and intelligently." And it must be said at the outset that F.'s volume fulfills this intention. It gives the reader a clear sense of the historical, literary, and theological context of the books of Kings without being too technical. The commentary is narrative in format rather than verse-by-verse, and this contributes to the book's readability. The exposition is well written and engaging. Moreover, F. is persuaded that Israel's life "mirrors the life of the people of God in our own time" (p. 3) to a larger extent than is initially apparent. Hence, he includes 43 "theological reflections" on a wide variety of topics interspersed throughout the commentary. While F. clearly writes for a Christian audience his commentary and theological reflections are not as overtly christological as one might have expected, so that non-Christians may also profit from them. The basis of the commentary is the NRSV. The biblical text is generally supplied, but not always, and it is not clear why certain sections are omitted.

Fretheim treats the books of Kings as part of the Deuteronomistic History, and he favors the double redaction theory of the DtrH's composition. He does not attempt systematically to distinguish editorial levels in this commentary, but he does make the blanket statement that the writer(s) behind the DtrH were more editors than authors (p. 6). This leads him, in my view, to a misunderstanding of the books of Kings that is a potential source of confusion for his readers. First, while F. rightly notes the importance of prophets in Kings, he fails, strangely, to point out the structural role of the oracles against the dynasties (1 Kgs 14:7-14; 16:1-4; 21:17-24) and their fulfillment notices (1 Kgs 15:27-30; 16:11-13; 2 Kgs 9:5-10, 25-26, 36-37). He notes the dissimilarities between Elijah's oracle in 1 Kings 21 and its fulfillment in 2 Kings 9-10 but does not
mention the redactional work of Dtr and others that these signal (pp. 119-121). He refers to the Rabshakeh's speech in 2 Kings 18 as "typical royal style" rather than noting its Dtr provenance. F. does not, therefore, give sufficient recognition to the overall Deuteronomistic structure and creativity of the books of Kings.

Part of the reason that F. does not perceive the Deuteronomistic unity of the initial book of Kings is that he does not separate if from later additions. F. assumes, for instance, the antiquity of the Elijah and Elisha stories and the tales in 1 Kings 20; 22. But these materials, with the likely exception of 1 Kings 21* and its fulfillment in 2 Kings 9-10*, are post-Dtr additions. Recognizing this would clarify a number of confusing statements in the commentary. Thus, despite F.'s admission that "Elijah is an interruption" and that the Dtr presence in the Elijah stories is "less visible," he still concludes that they "carry the freight of his concerns" (p. 94). F. recognizes the Ahab in 1 Kings 20 is a type (p. 113) but ignores the historical problems that make it impossible for the king of Israel in these stories to have been Ahab. F. points out late features in the Elisha narratives-crossreferences to other biblical stories, universalism, similarity to legends about wonder-working heroes-but he avoids their implications by discussions of such matters as intertextuality and miracles. (His historical contention that miracles could happen on p. 149 is in tension with his earlier observations on p. 139 about literary genre.) In the case of the Babylonian envoy to Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20:12-19), which is also a fairly obvious addition foreshadowing the exile, F. resorts to language about a "flashback."

It may be unfair to criticize a work written for a popular audience for not dealing with the complexities of redactional analysis and compositional history. And I say again that F.'s work is a useful tool for helping laypersons to read 1-2 Kings more clearly and intelligently. But a more streamlined understanding and explanation of the Dtr contribution in the books of Kings and how the work was altered by subsequent additions would clarify those books even more for all readers.