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# The Message of Kings

# The Message of Kings

*God is present*

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**Inter-Varsity Press**

InterVarsity Press  
P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426  
Internet: [www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com)  
E-mail: [email@ivpress.com](mailto:email@ivpress.com)

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ISBN 978-0-8308-2435-9

Printed in the United States of America ∞



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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Olley, John W. (John William), 1938-  
*The message of Kings: God is present / John W. Olley.*  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.  
ISBN 978-0-8308-2435-9 (pbk.: alk. paper)  
1. Bible. O.T. Kings—Commentaries. I. Title.  
BS1335.53.O45 2011  
222'.507—dc23

2011032891

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P	17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Y	26	25	24	23	22	21	20	19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12		

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# A. Solomon's reign

## 1 Kings 1 – 11

### 1 Kings 1:1 – 2:46

#### 1. Solomon becomes king

##### 1. Transition is imminent (1:1–4)

*King David was very old.* The simple statement signifies time for change. Like the start of Joshua (1:1) and Judges (1:1), Kings opens with a link to the previous book. Similar to Moses and Joshua's long and successful leadership, for forty years David had been king over Judah – thirty-three years for the combined Israel and Judah (1 Kgs 2:11). But what is to follow?

That the focus of chapter 1 is on kingship is shown by the designation of key characters. Not only is *King* the first word but David is always *King David* (nine times),<sup>1</sup> *the king* (thirty nine times)<sup>2</sup> and only once *our lord David* (v. 11). The first instance of simply *David* is in 2:1, after the issue of succession is resolved. Alongside are references to Adonijah seeking to become *king* (six times),<sup>3</sup> the promise that Solomon is to be *king* (four times)<sup>4</sup> and statement that he has become *king* (seven times),<sup>5</sup> or the question as to which is to be *king* (vv. 20, 27). The seventy instances of the noun *king* or the related verb is the most in any chapter in the Bible. The narrative has movement as various questions arise. Will David act as king in his last days, and if so, how? What will happen because Adonijah wants to be king? What about Solomon?

In recent years it has become common to talk about 'succession planning' in organisations and companies. As groups have become

<sup>1</sup> Verses 1, 13, 28, 31, 32, 37, 38, 43, 47. There are only sixteen instances in all of 2 Samuel. Statistics in this paragraph relate to MT. EVV may vary.

<sup>2</sup> Verses 2 (3x), 3, 4 (2x), 9 (2x), 13, 14, 15 (3x), 16 (2x), 19, 20 (2x), 21, 22, 23 (3x), 24, 25, 27 (2x), 28, 29, 31, 32, 33, 36 (2x), 37, 44 (2x), 47.

<sup>3</sup> Verses 5, 11, 13, 18, 24, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Verses 13, 17, 30, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Verses 39, 43, 45, 51 (2x), 53 (2x).

aware of increasing complexities and turbulence with the ending of isolation from global influences, many have seen the wisdom of planning. Churches and missionary organisations that have enjoyed a long period of stable leadership wisely plan, with prayerful mentoring and training of potential leaders for the next generation. There is concern that what is believed to be the God-given vision and ethos of the organisation continues with strength, especially when the group has been the result largely, under God, of the vision and drive of a key person. What happens when that person becomes *old*? There are two extremes: that nothing has been done, or that the successor is a clone when change is needed. The pattern of Jesus training his disciples for their tasks after his ascension is often cited as a model, as is Paul's encouragement of the young Timothy.

In the case of Moses, Joshua had spent many years alongside, the benefits evidenced in Joshua's ensuing leadership. However, while Joshua ended his life with stirring farewell speeches (Josh. 23 – 24), Judges is a sad story of chaos in the following generations. Throughout that period leadership was in the hands of 'judges/leaders' raised up by God (Judg. 2:16), with the only instance of a dynastic situation, that of Gideon's son Abimelech, being a mockery (Judg. 9). 1 Samuel starts with Eli the priest whose sons were moral failures (1 Sam. 2:12–17). It continues to tell how, surprisingly, Samuel appointed his own sons as 'judges/leaders', but they acted unjustly, seeking selfish gain and unwanted by the people (1 Sam. 8:1–5). A dynastic model has not had a good record! The first king, Saul, had been succeeded by David, chosen by God from a different family and tribe. With David comes a change: after centuries of raising up leaders, Yahweh promised that he would establish for David a *house* (dynasty; 2 Sam. 7:11–16). The past experience of leaders' sons raises the questions: what kind of person will the next king be, and which son will be king?

David's record of family relationships, including the raising and training of his sons, is not a pleasant story (2 Sam. 11 – 20). Further, there has been not even a hint as to his successor. It would seem that David's negligence in the family included not preparing one. While *very old* indicates time for significant transition to the next generation,<sup>6</sup> the account of David's weakening condition points to impending death with uncertainty as to whether anything can be expected. Coverings do not keep him warm and a young woman does not arouse him. That Abishag is to *lie in your bosom* (NRSV) is to be read in the context of a court where the king has a number of

<sup>6</sup> The phrase is used elsewhere of Abraham (Gen. 24:1) and Joshua (Josh. 13:1; 23:1).

wives and concubines (2 Sam. 5:13; 15:16),<sup>7</sup> but the phrase also echoes Nathan's description of the ewe lamb who used to 'lie in the bosom' of the poor owner, a parable concerning Uriah's wife, Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:3; cf. 12:8). Before Bathsheba appears later in the chapter, we are reminded of the event that brought her to the court. David may be the king chosen by God, he may have had great victories and been 'a man after the LORD's heart' (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22), but he was also a person of moral failure and now physical infirmity. Biblical narrative never glosses over human weakness and sin: God works in and through imperfect people, and, as we will see, in and through human machinations and conflict.

The writer may be suggesting more by opening the book on David's deathbed. Leithart describes well two possibilities, the rest of Kings illustrating both:

Does this foreshadow the eventual death of the Davidic monarchy and of Israel, thrown into the grave of exile? Or does 1 – 2 Kings *begin* at a deathbed to show that history moves on after death, to suggest a hope for resurrection?<sup>8</sup>

Early readers are experiencing the death of exile, but just as the book will go on to speak of Yahweh's gracious involvement after David's death, so there is hope after Israel's. God is consistent in character, so the telling of his actions in the past gives confidence for the future. That Kings is now part of the Law, Prophets and Writings<sup>9</sup> is an expression of the faith of the Jews<sup>10</sup> after exile; that it is included in the Christian canon of the Old and New Testaments points to its foreshadowing of the God who raises from the dead. God's action in the death and resurrection of Jesus is a focusing of his deeds throughout history – he continues to bring life where death seems to be the end.

## 2. Adonijah acts (1:5–10)

A feature of national histories is that death, or impending death, of a current leader can be a time of violence and bloodshed, the result of family feuds and vendettas, of regional jealousies and personal

<sup>7</sup> Monson, pp. 11–12.

<sup>8</sup> Leithart, p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> The threefold division in the Hebrew Bible gave rise to the acronym *Tanakh* from the beginning letters of the Hebrew for each section: *Torah* ('Law, teaching'), *Nevi'im* ('Prophets') and *Kethuvim* ('Writings').

<sup>10</sup> It is common in English to speak of 'Jews' from the exile on (Hebrew *yēhūdî*, Greek *Ioudaios*). 'Judean' is used in some contexts.

ambitions. As we read through Kings we will meet instances of all. The opening chapter describes a ‘particular history [that] is *an arena for God’s purpose* . . . [with] the practice of politics that is calculating, manipulative, and at the brink of violence.’<sup>11</sup> The experience of suffering, violence and oppression often leads to asking, ‘Where is God?’ The biblical narrative is a reminder that God is in the midst, there working out his purposes. This does not make everything good, but God brings good (Rom. 8:28), seen most clearly in the human actions surrounding Christ’s death.

*Adonijah*, although David’s fourth born, is the oldest surviving son (2 Sam. 3:2–5). Amnon, the eldest, had been killed by Absalom, the third son, following the rape of his sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13:23–29), while Absalom in turn died during his revolt against David (2 Sam. 18:9–17). Nothing else is known of Kileab, the second, so he was probably dead. Adonijah may have believed the throne was rightfully his as the eldest, but in the ancient Near East ‘primogeniture is not always the rule . . . In some cultures, brothers had priority over sons. In others it was up to the king to designate his successor, and in some cases the subjects had to consent.’<sup>12</sup> That David himself had been the youngest in his family continues a biblical pattern where the eldest does not have priority in God’s purposes, but will this be so in the Davidic line?<sup>13</sup> Adonijah decides to take pre-emptive steps: he is not waiting for David either to designate a successor or to die. He may well have thought that David was now so ineffective that action was needed – and he was used to getting his own way. As had the older Absalom when he briefly seized power, Adonijah gets *chariots and horses ready, with fifty men to run ahead* (v. 5; 2 Sam. 15:1), and like Absalom he too was *very handsome* (v. 6; 2 Sam. 14:25) and invites others to a sacrificial meal (v. 9; 2 Sam. 15:11–12). The details of the people invited, including *all the royal officials of Judah*, and of those excluded, show that ‘Adonijah turns to people who had been with David before he became king in Jerusalem . . . These are the conservative elements, the “old guard” in David’s regime based in Hebron.’<sup>14</sup> The poignancy of the situation involving a family split is shown by the repetition of ‘brother’: he invited *all his brothers*, but *his brother Solomon* he did not invite.

David’s success had been bringing together the tribes of Judah (south) and Israel (north), with Jerusalem in between as a neutral ‘city of David’ (2 Sam. 5). There his key personnel had come both

<sup>11</sup> Brueggemann, p. 20 (emphasis his).

<sup>12</sup> Walton, Matthews and Chavalas, p. 355.

<sup>13</sup> David, 1 Sam. 16:11–13: cf. Jacob, Gen. 25:26; Joseph, Gen. 37:5–11; Ephraim, Gen. 48:13–14, 20; Judah, Gen. 49:8–10.

<sup>14</sup> Seow, p. 18.

from the old Judahite core and from a wider background, including as priests both Abiathar and Zadok. Adonijah's actions show that it was David who held the whole together (compare the tensions evident in 2 Sam. 19:9 – 20:22). Although Adonijah's name ('Yahweh is my lord') spoke of Yahweh, the covenantal God of all the tribes to whom he is sacrificing animals, regional and tribal loyalty (and 'the old guard') take precedence in his thinking and actions.

Reading his divisive but calculated power-grabbing action in its broader context, along with comparison with Absalom, can lead us to reflect on personal attitudes and motivations in times of decision and response to change: what is the place of family and regional or national allegiances in comparison to belonging to Christ, in whom there is 'neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28)?

### 3. Nathan the prophet takes control (1:11–27)

It is not David or Solomon who respond to Adonijah's initiatives, but *Nathan the prophet*, the first of a succession of prophets in Kings. The book may be called Kings, but throughout prophets often take the lead. That in itself may challenge our own perceptions as to who are the 'history makers'.<sup>15</sup> Is it those with political power, commonly associated with military and economic might, or people who are open to the word of God and understand his purposes?

Previously Nathan had spoken face-to-face with David (2 Sam. 7:2; 12:1, 25) but now an indirect approach seems necessary. Further, there is no mention of direction from Yahweh. While Nathan's plan can seem to be shrewd manipulation, safeguarding his own position which is threatened by Adonijah's exclusion, it can also be read as what he sees as best for the kingdom based in Jerusalem and covering both Israel and Judah. Mixed motives are a feature of human behaviour, but it is through such that God works.

Nathan first enlists Bathsheba's involvement, focusing on the threat to hers and Solomon's life, and it is only after she approaches David that he enters to corroborate her story. Repetition is a pointer to importance: in a printed text bold or italic type can show emphasis, but in a text that is meant to be heard emphasis comes by repetition of details. The threefold description of the crisis of Adonijah's coup, with variation (vv. 11–14, 17–21, 24–27), brings to the fore David's inactivity regarding the promise to Bathsheba concerning Solomon. The earlier statement that David *had never rebuked* Adonijah (v. 6;

<sup>15</sup> A term introduced by W. Brueggemann in 'Making History', *The Other Side*, October 1986, pp. 21–25.

NRSV ‘displeased’) suggests that David’s leniency would have let things go on, either because Adonijah was now his favourite or else he was too tired to act – to go against past patterns would require much effort. As with Nathan, Bathsheba’s motivation and attitude are unclear. The only mention of Yahweh is in the context of David’s oath.

Bathsheba, as the one to whom the promise was made, is to remind David and warn him of the consequences of failure to keep his word. Pointedly she says, *the eyes of all Israel are on you, to learn from you who will sit on the throne of my lord the king after him*. While Adonijah’s focus is Judah, David is king of *all Israel*, and it is his responsibility to let the people know his choice of Solomon. Nathan’s rebuke is indirect: he asks whether in fact David has designated Adonijah as successor, *without letting his servants know* (v. 27; note the twofold *your servant* in v. 26). As in approaching David after the murder of Uriah (2 Sam. 12), ‘Nathan directly addresses the failure of the king without violating royal prerogative or arousing the anger of the king.’<sup>16</sup> Previously he had used a parable evoking response, here he challenges by asking for an answer to a question (vv. 24, 27).

The storytelling approaches a climax, its style maintaining hearers’ interest (and that of later readers of a printed Bible). At the same time, in its portrayal of characters and relationships it provides a mirror reflecting light on other situations. We are confronted with the consequences of leadership that has become weak, lacking the heart to discipline favourites or confront cliques, but we also see a prophet who knows how to confront appropriately. Sometimes it is appropriate to challenge a person directly with statements reminding of past promises and present responsibilities. That can best be done when there is a personal relationship of trust or affection between the people involved: Bathsheba is able to warn of her own personal danger, and expect that the appeal will be heard. At other times effective use of questions is the best way to disarm and call for response, particularly in situations of power inequality. Questions mean the listener becomes active.

Asking questions was a common feature of Jesus’ relating to people. Often, with his disciples, or people who came to him, they were educative, but were also effective in situations of antagonism.<sup>17</sup> Centuries earlier the Greek philosopher Socrates was renowned for his dialogical style, engaging his pupils, an approach counsellors

<sup>16</sup> Konkel, pp. 54–55.

<sup>17</sup> For example, disciples (Matt. 16:13–16, 26; 17:25; 18:12; 20:21–22); interested people (Matt. 8:7; 19:17; John 1:38); conflict (Matt. 9:4–5; 12:29; 19:4–5; 21:23–27; 22:41–45; John 10:32; 18:34).

and communicators are rediscovering, particularly in a postmodern world. Graham Johnston has written on the significance for preachers:

‘In inductive preaching, you unroll your idea in such a way that listeners have to work to get it themselves.’<sup>18</sup> When a preacher actively engages the minds of listeners, not only is their attention captured, but they receive more thorough[ly] the joy of discovery.<sup>19</sup>

In the light of our passage we could add, ‘or the pain of realising an unpleasant truth and its consequences.’ Nathan knew what questions to ask to evoke response.

#### 4. David makes Solomon king (1:28–40)

We noted above the varied use of ‘king’ in the chapter. All came together in v. 13: ‘Go in to *King* David and say to him, “My lord the *king*, did you not swear to me your servant: ‘Surely Solomon your son shall be *king* after me, and he will sit on my throne’? Why then has Adonijah *become king*?”’ Repetition has highlighted the drama: will King David, old as he is, truly act as king and announce clearly to the people who will be king after him?

The answer is unmistakable as David makes an oath in the presence of Bathsheba. She who initially had been the object of David’s lust, and whose husband had been a pawn to sacrifice, is now the recipient of the words that guaranteed her safety and the future of her son. By invoking again the name of *the LORD*, as he had done previously (vv. 13, 17), David affirms that as *king* he is subject to God. The addition, [*Yahweh*] *has delivered me out of every trouble*, is unexpected. It appears to be a recognition that in Bathsheba and Nathan’s intervention Yahweh has stepped in to the current crisis, rescuing David, and Israel, from the trouble caused by his inactivity regarding Adonijah.

The key turning point (highlighted by verse 28 beginning a new section in Hebrew Bibles) comes with David giving orders: *King David* is now exercising royal power. Three key people are to be involved in the coronation: *Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet and Benaiah son of Jehoida*. Zadok was first named as priest along with Abiathar in the list of royal officials after David had made Jerusalem his capital (2 Sam. 8:17) and the two are linked together

<sup>18</sup> Johnston is here quoting Fred Craddock.

<sup>19</sup> G. Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), p. 152.

elsewhere (2 Sam. 15:24–29, 35; 17:15; 19:11; 20:25).<sup>20</sup> While Abiathar had been with David from early days (1 Sam. 22:20), separation from both David and Zadok came as he supported Adonijah (vv. 7, 19, 25). Benaiah, ‘a valiant fighter’ (2 Sam. 23:20–23), was officer in charge of the royal guard, *Kerethites and Pelethites* (v. 38), mercenaries originally from Crete and Philistia,<sup>21</sup> while Joab who sided with Adonijah was a son of David’s sister (1 Chr. 2:15–16) and leader of the army (2 Sam. 8:16; 20:23). While Adonijah had key priestly and military support, only for Solomon was a *prophet* involved.

Adonijah had organized for himself a gathering outside the city, at a spring about 650 yards (600 m) south of the Gihon Spring, on the boundary of the territories of Judah and Benjamin where the Hinnom and Kidron valleys meet, and his entourage of chariots and runners was a symbol of power. Solomon however was to be crowned with ceremonies associated with royalty, riding on the royal mule (2 Sam. 18:9), a more expensive animal than a horse.<sup>22</sup> The ceremony was to take place at the *Gihon* Spring (‘the Gusher’),<sup>23</sup> source of Jerusalem’s water supply and just below the temple – and well within earshot of Adonijah’s party. Solomon’s support base is the leadership of Jerusalem, the city of David: he is to be *ruler over Israel and Judah* (v. 35).

The symbolic riding on *King David’s mule* (v. 38) leads on to the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 and its fulfilment in Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (Matt. 21:1–11 and parallels). Jesus is no usurper, but the one who has been designated ‘son of David’ (Luke 1:32). He is a ruler who welcomes all – rejected by elitist religious leaders (yet challenging their understanding<sup>24</sup>), he was acclaimed by the blind (Matt. 9:27; 20:30–31), a desperate Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:22) and by the followers and children on Palm Sunday (Matt. 21:9, 15).

The use of *ruler* (v. 35; *nāgîd*), as well as *king* (*melek*), is significant. A ‘king’ in the ancient Near East generally had absolute power, so *ruler* (NRSV, *prince*) is a reminder that it is Yahweh who is King, to whom the ruler/prince is accountable to do what is just and right.

<sup>20</sup> For further discussion on Zadok see D. W. Rooke, ‘Zadok, Zadokites’, *DOTHB*, pp. 1012–1016.

<sup>21</sup> Also 2 Sam. 15:18; 20:23; Walton, Matthews and Chavalas, pp. 344, 356; Monson, pp. 14–15.

<sup>22</sup> Walton, Matthews and Chavalas, p. 356.

<sup>23</sup> As Gihon is the name of one of the rivers of Eden (Gen. 2:13), J. A. Davies, ‘“Discerning between Good and Evil”: Solomon as a New Adam in 1 Kings’, *Westminster Theological Journal* 73 (2011), pp. 39–58, sees this as one of several verbal associations between the Solomon narrative and Genesis 1–3. He observes also that Adonijah was at ‘the Stone of Zohelth’, suggesting ‘Serpent’s Stone’ (v. 9).

<sup>24</sup> Matt. 22:42–45.

‘Ruler’ occurs at significant turning points in the history of Israelite kingship: at the anointing of Saul (1 Sam. 9:16; 10:1); at the announcement that Saul’s kingdom will not continue and that Yahweh would appoint another as ‘ruler . . . because you have not kept the LORD’s command’ (1 Sam. 13:14), with reference to David (1 Sam. 25:30; 2 Sam. 5:2; 6:21; 7:8); after Solomon, regarding Jeroboam, the first ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel (1 Kgs 14:7; 16:2); and in relation to Hezekiah, after the fall of the northern kingdom (2 Kgs 20:5). Kings has frequent reminders that kings of Israel and Judah are to obey God, the first being David’s charge to Solomon (2:2–4). ‘While the *melek* “sees his power from Yahweh as susceptible to his own arbitrary manipulation”, the *nagid* is “no more than the willing subject of the divine monarch”. Kings in Israel do not cease to be “prince” (*nagid*) in Yahweh’s eyes.’<sup>25</sup>

Both Zadok and Nathan *anoint* Solomon *king* (vv. 34, 45), while Benaiah adds his commitment to both David and Solomon (vv. 36–37). The ceremony is accompanied by joyous, ground-shaking shouts of loyalty from *all the people* (vv. 39–40). Something of the exuberant acclamation has been captured by George Frideric Handel in an anthem composed for the coronation in 1727 of George II of Great Britain, and sung at every British coronation service since, accompanied by the brilliance of the trumpets, with oboes and bassoon prominent – Handel’s equivalents of the *trumpet* and *pipes*. Based on verses 38–40, the anthem’s words, ‘And all the people rejoic’d and said: “God save the King, long live the King, may the King live for ever”’ are appropriate prayerful expressions of loyalty in many modern nations, without identifying the nation as the continuation of Israel and Judah.

The contemporary challenge is how appropriately to express publicly and nationally that all, leaders and people, are subject to God. This was straightforward for Israel, at least in ritual if not in life, as it can be for an established church-state relationship, as in England. So there a coronation is a religious service, with an anointing by the Archbishop of Canterbury. While in the USA there is constitutional separation of church and state, the inauguration of the President includes prayers by religious leaders. Similarly, in Australia parliamentary sessions open with the Lord’s Prayer. Political discussion in Britain and the USA from the seventeenth century spoke of ‘the sovereignty of the people’, although since 1954 the USA Pledge of Allegiance includes ‘one nation under God’ – the people themselves

<sup>25</sup> J. G. McConville, *God and Earthly Power: An Old Testament Political Theology, Genesis – Kings* (London: T.&T. Clark, 2006), p. 137, with quotes from D. F. Murray, *Divine Prerogative and Royal Pretension* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p. 299.

are subjects. How this is worked out in multi-faith contexts, whether Christians are a majority or minority, is a larger question than can be covered here. In all contexts followers of Christ are given the clear injunction to pray ‘for kings and all those in authority’, with which is associated ‘that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness’ and that God ‘wants all people to be saved’ (1 Tim. 2:1–4). To join, like the people at Solomon’s coronation, in loyal prayer for leaders is to affirm God’s intention that they fulfil his gracious, saving, just purposes for all people. Leaders, for their part, are to recognize that their rights are limited, for all human beings are ‘in the image of God’<sup>26</sup> and as such only God can claim full allegiance (Gen. 1:26; Matt. 22:15–21 and parallels).

### 5. The end of Adonijah’s *coup d’état* (1:41–53)

Adonijah hears the joyous shouting and assumes that Jonathan brings *good news*.<sup>27</sup> In describing Jonathan as *a worthy man*, Adonijah is probably hoping to have him on his side, after all Jonathan’s father is *Abiathar the priest*. Years earlier however Jonathan had been loyal to David during Absalom’s rebellion (2 Sam. 15:36) and now pointedly speaks of *our lord King David* as he recounts what happened. He adds new details (vv. 46–48) of the actual accession to the throne, of *the royal officials* (NRSV: *king’s servants*) who *congratulate our lord King David* – we can observe the repeated terms of allegiance. (Adonijah had invited only officials who were ‘men of Judah’ [v. 9].) David may be weak, *on his bed* (v. 47), but Jonathan’s report culminates in the worship given by David, praising *the LORD, the God of Israel*, again with the inclusive ‘Israel’. Yahweh who delivers ‘out of every trouble’ (v. 29) has enabled David to see this deliverance, with a secure successor.

The passage ends with a reversal of the coup as Adonijah is not killed, as he feared, but is given the option of living as a loyal subject, as he is told to *go to your home*. (This is short-lived, see 2:13–25.) ‘All’s well that ends well’ is a popular saying, but it has been a tortuous route to David’s decisive action, Solomon’s accession and safety for Adonijah as a loyal subject. David has seen Yahweh’s action in the process and so gives thanks.

The mirror of the narrative may help us see God’s hand in messy situations we are (or have been, or will be) involved in, whether due to our own inactivity or wrongdoing or the scheming and

<sup>26</sup> The or has democratized the prevalent ancient Near Eastern ascribing of this term only to kings (G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* [Waco: Word, 1987], pp. 30–31).

<sup>27</sup> The LXX has the verb *euangelizō*, used in the NT for announcing the good news of Christ.

self-centred injustice of others. The narrative however continues. The peaceful resolution is only temporary – a common experience known by all! Solomon’s rule will fall short of God’s requirements, our circumstances will change, but Yahweh is still present as the one who *delivers out of every trouble*. David can rejoice that God *has allowed my eyes to see a successor on my throne today*. A thousand years later, Paul could celebrate the message of God’s wisdom that

none of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory . . . :

‘What no eye has seen,  
what no ear has heard,  
and what no human mind has conceived’ –  
the things God has prepared for those who love him –

these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.<sup>28</sup>

David may ‘see a successor’ but by the Spirit we are able to see the mystery of Christ crucified, the one ‘greater than Solomon’ (Matt. 12:42; Luke 11:31). We can look forward to seeing more of the glory that is to come, ‘at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne’ (Matt. 19:28).

## 6. David’s last words to Solomon (2:1–12)

‘Last words’ from key people are a feature of biblical narrative, looking to the future: Jacob (Gen. 49:1–28) and Moses (Deut. 33) gave blessings, while Joshua (Josh. 24:1–28) and Samuel (1 Sam. 12) challenged the whole people at times of transition. David’s words are spoken to Solomon alone, but again they present directions for the future.

Two disparate components are juxtaposed. The first is similar to previous leaders’ ‘last words’, with promises of Yahweh linked with human response and so relevant for all future generations (vv. 2–4). Starkly different is the second with no mention of God, its practical advice being of the kind that could be replicated in similar contexts through to today (vv. 5–12). Both aim to secure the continuity of the Davidic dynasty, but they reflect two sides of David’s character, and the character of many leaders since, a combination of sincere piety and pragmatic calculating politics.

<sup>28</sup> 1 Cor. 2:8–10, including an adaptation of Isa. 64:4.

*a. Strength in obedience (2:1–4)*

*Be strong* echoes Yahweh's words to Joshua (Josh. 1:7, 9). Depending on our own cultural experiences varied images come to mind as to what is involved in 'strong leadership'.<sup>29</sup> What kinds of advice might flow from those images? It is likely that what follows here, as also for Joshua, is unexpected: *observe what the LORD your God requires* – strength and courage are required to *walk in obedience to him* (NRSV, 'in his ways'). Significantly, temptations that Jesus faced were in the area of leadership and whether he would walk in the ways of his Father. Satan tempted him to use his power for his own material comfort and to follow an alternative, and easier, route to rule over the 'kingdoms of the world' (Matt. 4:1–10). The later words to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan!' come after Peter rebukes Jesus for saying he was to suffer, die and be raised – for Peter (as for Satan) the path to being 'the Christ', the anointed King, avoids the cross. Pointedly Jesus goes on to say that the path for followers is also the way of the cross (Matt. 16:13–28). Christ's 'strength', showing compassion, mercy and love of enemies, was regarded as weakness in a context of the Roman Empire. There, success came through military and economic might, associated with arrogance and ruthlessness, and insensitivity to the needs of others, especially the weak and powerless. In subtle ways, from various sources, pressure can come to put the comfort and security of oneself or one's group to the fore, taking short cuts to what is seen as a 'good' end. God however does not leave us to our own resources: his Spirit is promised as enabling power (Acts 1:8; Rom. 8), so, to David's injunction to *be strong*, Paul can add 'in the Lord and in his mighty power' (Eph. 6:10).

David continued in his charge to state the result of walking in Yahweh's ways: *so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go* (v. 3). Another suitable translation of *hiškîl*, instead of 'prosper', is 'be successful' (NLT; as in NIV Josh. 1:7–8). All societies and cultures tell stories of 'success', with today's mass media bombarding with images. That is one reason why the Gospel narrative of Jesus Christ has to be heard repeatedly, to saturate our minds with the greatest 'success' story of all. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus himself compares the person 'who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice' with the wise man who built his house on the rock, so remaining firm in the turmoil of life (Matt. 7:24–27). The way of Christ alone leads to lasting success.

<sup>29</sup> Leadership values will be explored further in discussing choices faced by Rehoboam (1 Kgs 12).

Another alternative translation of *hiskil*, ‘understand’ or ‘gain insight’, was adopted in the LXX translation made in the second century BC.<sup>30</sup> In Hebrew ‘the form *hiskil* refers both to the “deed” and to the “consequence of the deed,” i.e., both to the state of being prudent and to the success deriving from such prudence.’<sup>31</sup> In the garden of Eden the woman saw that the tree was desirable for ‘gaining wisdom’ (the same verb): the temptation was to gain understanding and resultant success independently of obeying God. It is not only that one is ‘wise’ and so acts appropriately but it is in the following of God’s ways that wisdom is gained; ‘hearing’ and ‘doing’ belong together.

*So that* links ‘success, prosperity, understanding’ as the result God desires for those who are already his people. Blessings come with and flow out of obedience, acting in accordance with the way we have been created, not only as humans but as those to whom Paul says, ‘By grace you have been saved through faith; . . . created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should *walk* in them’ (Eph. 2:8–10, rsv). C. S. Lewis, in a much-quoted sermon preached in 1941, helpfully compared two kinds of rewards, depending on whether there is a ‘necessary connection’: ‘Money is not the natural reward of love . . . but marriage is the proper reward for a real lover . . . An enjoyment of Greek poetry is certainly a proper, and not a mercenary, reward for learning Greek.’ The key is that ‘the proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation’.<sup>32</sup>

This first injunction to Solomon is later repeated to him by Yahweh in similar words before, during and after the building of the temple (3:11; 6:11–13; 9:4–5). From the beginning we are given a lens through which to look at the whole narrative. Solomon’s reign will exhibit many commonly-accepted elements of success and prosperity, admired exuberantly by the Queen of Sheba (10:6–9). Readers however know that these did not last and that beneath the surface prosperity much was rotten. There is only one way to genuine and lasting success: to *walk* in Yahweh’s ways is the path to the blessings God wishes to give.

#### *b. Pre-emptive action (2:5–12)*

Turning from verses 1–4 to verses 5–9 is like listening to a sermon on Sunday that honours God and is uplifting, but finding difficulty

<sup>30</sup> The same Greek translation is in Deut. 29:9; Josh. 1:7–8; 1 Sam. 18:14–15.

<sup>31</sup> K. Koenen, ‘*sākal*’, *TDOT*, vol. 14, p. 122.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Weight of Glory’ in C. S. Lewis, *Transposition and Other Addresses* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1949), and *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, intro. and ed., W. Hooper (New York: Macmillan, 1980).

in applying it to the relationships and situations of Monday – and sometimes the attempt is given up as impossible. As we read this component of David's advice to Solomon the bare narrated facts are straightforward, but evaluation is contentious. Here is life in the raw, when all characters involved are less than perfect.

The book of Samuel has shown a David who is capable of brutal removal of those who endanger his plans: he planned a massacre of Nabal and his household (1 Sam. 25) and cold-bloodedly ordered Uriah's murder (2 Sam. 11:14–25). More legitimately he was an admired warrior, attracting the loyalty of many (1 Sam. 18:5; 22:1–2). Quite differently, a peacemaking character is widely portrayed in his refusal to act against Saul, 'Yahweh's anointed' (1 Sam. 24, 26) and in his gracious reconciliation with those who rebelled or fought against him,<sup>33</sup> and he grieves over Absalom's death (2 Sam. 18:33). Noticeable is his frequent willingness to leave it to Yahweh to act.<sup>34</sup> The two characteristics are brought together in 1 Samuel 24 – 26: two accounts of his sparing Saul frame the Nabal encounter.<sup>35</sup> Nabal's insolent treatment of David's men led to angry plans to destroy Nabal and his household, prevented only by the wise intervention of Abigail to whom David says, 'May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands' (1 Sam. 25:33). David recognizes the avenging side of his character that is to be controlled.

It comes as a surprise at the end of David's life to see the overturning of his previous peacemaking actions. *Joab* is a *son of Zeruiah*, David's sister, as are Abishai and Asahel (1 Chr. 2:15–16). David's relationship with the three over decades has been tumultuous, with Joab as David's army commander, apart from a brief period after Absalom's death when David appointed Amasa (2 Sam. 19:13).<sup>36</sup> The brothers show loyalty, but their violent actions exasperate David, threatening his conciliatory approaches ('What does this have to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah?', 2 Sam. 16:10; 19:22). It is easy to

<sup>33</sup> Abner, commander of Saul's army, 2 Sam. 2:8; 3:6–21; Amasa, Absalom's army commander, 2 Sam. 17:25; 19:13; Shimei who cursed him, 2 Sam. 16:5–14; 19:16–23.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Sam. 24:12; 25:33, 39; 2 Sam. 3:39; 15:25–26; 16:12.

<sup>35</sup> R. P. Gordon, 'David's Rise and Saul's Demise: Narrative Analogy in 1 Samuel 24 – 26', *Tyndale Bulletin* 31 (1980), pp. 37–64. D. M. Gunn, *The Story of David: Genre and Interpretation* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978) analyses the intertwining in 1 and 2 Samuel of David as king (political sphere) and as man (private sphere, husband and father), with incidents of 'giving' and 'grasping' in both. David proves to be most successful when his action is attuned to giving.

<sup>36</sup> Immediately prior to this Joab bluntly confronted David for 'humiliating' his army in his long grieving over Absalom (2 Sam. 19:1–8) and subsequently Joab treacherously killed Amasa (2 Sam. 20:8–10).

imagine Joab, a skilful but hawkish military commander, being frustrated at David's refusal to press home victory, and so taking the initiative himself and killing opponents. At the same time Joab as the loyal commander implemented David's strategy that led to Uriah's death (2 Sam. 11:14–25). Perhaps disappointment in David was a factor in his supporting Adonijah's failed coup (1:7). Now David tells Solomon to deal with Joab: he cites both an incident thirty-three years previously when the leaders of Israel came to make peace with David and acclaim him as king (2 Sam. 3:22–38) and a more recent incident, in which Joab treacherously killed Amasa, Absalom's former commander who had replaced Joab as David's commander (2 Sam. 20:4–10). What is surprising is that 'hitherto, David has apparently never felt compelled to take any action he is now contemplating'.<sup>37</sup> No longer does he leave it to Yahweh to act. We are left to wonder whether David became too tired to think of continuing peacemaking, an example of compassion fatigue, or now sees that policy as a mistake that cannot be continued.

A similar change of attitude happens with *Shimei son of Gera, the Benjaminite*. David remembers his first encounter with Shimei, 'from the same clan as Saul's family', who was continually 'cursing . . . and throwing stones at him and showering him with dirt' as David was fleeing from Jerusalem after Absalom's conspiracy. Abishai, one of the sons of Zeruiah, had wanted to kill Shimei but David said, 'Leave him alone' (2 Sam. 16:5–13). Upon Absalom's death, David sought peace with all who had rebelled, and so when Shimei came seeking clemency, despite Abishai again asserting that Shimei should be put to death, David acts as 'king' and says, "You shall not die." And the king promised him on oath' (2 Sam. 19:16–23). The next mention of Shimei is his non-involvement (as a Benjaminite) in Adonijah's coup (1:8), and so there is no sign of disloyalty to David. Again, we wonder why David is now vindictive. His direction to Solomon fulfils the letter of his oath, but not its spirit. Previously it was non-Israelite enemies who David defeated, but with people of Israel and Judah, members of God's people, he worked for reconciliation and peace. Now he is advising the death of individual Israelites.

In between directions regarding Joab and Shimei is the positive treatment of the family of *Barzillai of Gilead*. At the time of Absalom's revolt, after David established a camp across the Jordan, Barzillai and others provided material needs for David's company (2 Sam. 17:27–29). Later Barzillai declined David's invitation to go to Jerusalem, with David promising provision, but sent his servant Kinham (possibly a son; 2 Sam. 19:34–40). David is under no

<sup>37</sup> Provan, p. 33.

obligation, but the generosity is to continue. Again the question, why is this action included here?<sup>38</sup>

One likely interpretation is that David, as throughout his reign, is concerned for the future of the united kingdom of Israel and Judah. He had endeavoured all his life to keep the peace, to govern fairly for all, and the conciliatory moves had that goal. The account following David's return as king after Absalom's revolt points however to ongoing tensions between north and south (2 Sam. 19:41 – 20:22), and Adonijah's failed coup had its support amongst Judahites only. Possibly David's age and inactivity caused old tensions to come to the surface. If David found controlling Joab difficult, how much more would Solomon? Shimei as a Benjaminite may also have been seen as a potential threat to unity. Did David regret his oath? 'Certainly David does have personal revenge on his mind. But killing Shimei also lets the populace know that pro-Saul, anti-David sentiments will not be tolerated.'<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, the family of Barzillai from across the Jordan has potential for ongoing support if there were difficulties.

David's words and Solomon's implementation will mean that the 'kingdom was now established in Solomon's hands' (v. 46). The juxtaposition of verses 1–4 and verses 5–9 could thus be read as an endorsement of the king's 'employing the sword against evildoers'.<sup>40</sup> There are however pointers to a deliberate contrast. Twice Solomon is told to use his *wisdom* to remove potential enemies (vv. 6, 9), yet later when Yahweh appears to Solomon and grants 'wisdom' his commendation is that Solomon has *not* 'asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice' (3:11)! The pragmatic wisdom of David and Solomon is contrasted with that given by Yahweh.<sup>41</sup> When that is put alongside David's rejection of longstanding conciliatory approaches regarding Joab – he has not forgotten events from thirty years ago – and his casuistic treatment of the oath made concerning Shimei (and subsequently Solomon's own methods), it is rather more likely that the biblical writer wants us first to hear the charge to 'walk' in the Lord's ways, as that is how one best follows the example of David, the way to true insight

<sup>38</sup> The only other biblical references to Barzillai are in the parallel genealogies of Ezra 2:61 and Neh. 7:63. Amongst the priests who returned after the exile were descendants of 'Barzillai (a man who had married a daughter of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by that name)'.

<sup>39</sup> House, p. 98.

<sup>40</sup> So Leithart, p. 37.

<sup>41</sup> R. P. Gordon, 'A House Divided: Wisdom in Old Testament Narrative Traditions', in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, edited J. Day, R. P. Gordon and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 94–105. Gordon notes also that the last recorded activity of Solomon is seeking the life of his rival Jeroboam (11:40).

and success, while at the same time reminding readers who have seen the capture and exile of the Davidic king that in some ways the dynasty was flawed at the beginning. ‘There is a private side to David and Solomon that contrasts with the oft-stated portrayal of David’s righteousness and fidelity to YHWH and Solomon’s reputation for great wisdom.’<sup>42</sup>

Reading the final words of David can highlight the universality of flawed personalities: we are ‘sinners saved by grace’. It can help us reflect on how easily human behaviour can mix together a desire to serve God and walk his ways and a ‘doing what is best’ using methods that fall short of the way of Christ.

### 7. Solomon removes threats to his power (2:13–46)

After David’s death Solomon’s *rule was firmly established* (v. 12), the block of verses 13–46 telling how that happened (note v. 46b). The story in chapter 3 of Solomon receiving ‘wisdom’ from God is well-known, but first the writer tells how Solomon initially exercises *his* ‘wisdom’ (vv. 6, 9): he seeks to ensure the security of his own position by removing or neutralizing likely trouble makers.

David had not mentioned Adonijah (a reminder of his previous failure to discipline, 1:6), but that is the first threat to remove (vv. 13–25). Solomon had promised safety if Adonijah ‘shows himself to be worthy’ (1:52–53), but now Adonijah acts recklessly, even audaciously. He claims that *all Israel looked to me as their king* (v. 15), when in reality his approach had been Judah-centric. As a result of a spoilt upbringing, did he suffer from self-delusion as to his own importance, the rightful heir whose expectations have been thwarted, a person still to be reckoned with because of his standing as the oldest son and support from Abiathar and Joab? Certainly these factors are to the fore in Solomon’s response (v. 22). How much harm is done when people who have been used to power as ‘second in charge’ feel thwarted when someone else, whom they believe less qualified, is appointed as next leader? Paul’s words about pride are not spoken lightly: ‘For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you’ (Rom. 12:3).

Asking to have *Abishag* as wife was more than desiring a very ‘beautiful young woman’ (1:2–3). It was a blatant claim to status, symbolic of the power of the throne. Earlier examples are recounted during the reign of David: after Saul’s death Ish-Bosheth saw in

<sup>42</sup> Sweeney, p. 61.

Abner's relationship with Rizpah, Saul's concubine, a challenge to his own reign (2 Sam. 3:6–11); the prophet Nathan spoke of how Yahweh had given Saul's 'house and wives' to David (2 Sam. 12:8); and Absalom's rebellious assumption of kingship was demonstrated in his publicly taking David's concubines (2 Sam. 16:20–22). Wives and concubines were associated with royal power, commonly linked with political and economic alliances.<sup>43</sup>

The central person in the account is *Bathsheba, Solomon's mother* (v. 13), the inclusion of the relationship having twofold significance. First is a contrast with Adonijah's being *the son of Haggith*, and not of Bathsheba, crucial in David's choice of Solomon; but secondly, the king's mother had special status, although her specific functions are unclear (also vv. 19, 22).<sup>44</sup> In her dialogue with Adonijah and then with Solomon, it is possible to see a naivety: her words throughout, whether to Adonijah or to Solomon, appear supportive, accepting at face value Adonijah's affirmation that he comes *peacefully*. Her own fears concerning Adonijah during the attempted coup, her involvement with Nathan in the stratagem for approaching David (1:11–21), and readers' awareness of previous incidents involving concubines suggest rather that her failure to say anything negative to Adonijah is a shrewd response to his own deluded naivety. She knows her son and how he is likely to respond. There is irony in Adonijah's *he will not refuse you* (v. 17) and Solomon's *I will not refuse you* (v. 20): Solomon's angry response, refusing her spoken request, is best seen as doing what she actually wanted, removing a threat, not only to her son but herself (cf. 1:21). 'Bathsheba's well conceived strategies with both David and Solomon succeed in winning the kingdom for Solomon.'<sup>45</sup> If a question is thus raised concerning Bathsheba's honesty, there is correspondingly doubt regarding Solomon's integrity: he does not keep his word made even to his mother. Solomon acts swiftly, strengthening his resolve with an oath in the name of Yahweh who *has founded a dynasty for me as he promised* (v. 24), not the last time a ruler has used religious justification for a brutal action protecting his own position. His action has been debated. The fifth century Theodoret of Cyr commented that

<sup>43</sup> Walton, Matthews and Chavalas, pp. 357–358; J. D. Levenson and B. Halpern, 'The Political Import of David's Marriages', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99 (1980), pp. 11–28.

<sup>44</sup> One component of the regnal formula for kings of Judah is the naming of the king's mother (e.g., 14:21; 15:10). An overview of possible functions is given in A. Salvesen, 'Royal Family', *DOThB*, pp. 845–850.

<sup>45</sup> R. L. Cohn, 'Characterization in Kings', in Lemaire and Halpern, p. 96. House lists several disparate interpretations of Bathsheba's words and actions, arguing that she 'makes prudent moves in the halls of power' (p. 100).

Some people blame Solomon because he killed his brother. Now the ways of life of people are different . . . An apostolic or prophetic perfection cannot be expected from Solomon, but only those actions that are appropriate to kings . . . He was concerned for the tranquillity of his kingdom.<sup>46</sup>

Here is recognition of variety of situations in which people act, yet it can readily be used to excuse behaviour as ‘what everyone in my position does’. David’s initial words as given by the narrator (vv. 3–4) do not allow for differing standards. As in Solomon’s words, seeing God at work in bringing about a present position can easily slide to regarding as approved by God one’s own subsequent actions to protect that position. Much of Kings will tell of human efforts to ensure security that ultimately fail because of lack of trust in Yahweh that means following his ways.

The next recipient of Solomon’s attention is a close supporter of Adonijah, *Abiathar the priest* (v. 26; see 1:7). At least Solomon recognized faithful service, especially at the time of David’s flight from Absalom and subsequent return.<sup>47</sup> Solomon banishes him to his home in Anathoth, a rural village 3 miles (5 km) northeast of Jerusalem.<sup>48</sup> To the writer of Kings this is more than a political act, demoting a disloyal priest: it is the first of many instances where Yahweh’s word spoken through a prophet is fulfilled (1 Sam. 2:27–36; 3:11–14).<sup>49</sup>

Understandably *Joab* fears for his own life (v. 28). His relationships with David and Solomon have been mixed: he may have *conspired with Adonijah* but he had been loyal to David at the time of *Absalom’s* conspiracy, although he had killed Absalom contrary to David’s orders (2 Sam. 18:5, 9–15). Like Adonijah (1:50) he clings to the *horns of the altar*, claiming sanctuary.<sup>50</sup> The relevant law however provides sanctuary only for unintentional killing, and continues ‘but if anyone schemes and kills someone deliberately, that person is to be taken from my altar and put to death’ (Exod. 21:14). Thus Solomon explicitly justifies the order to kill Joab. Readers will be aware of the irony in his words, *so clear me and my whole family of the guilt of the innocent blood that Joab shed* (v. 31): Joab himself had carried out David’s orders to see that the innocent

<sup>46</sup> Cited in Conti, p. 11.

<sup>47</sup> 1 Sam. 23:6–12; 2 Sam. 15:24–29, 35–36; 20:25.

<sup>48</sup> Centuries later Jeremiah was identified as ‘one of the priests at Anathoth’ (Jer. 1:1).

<sup>49</sup> See introduction, pp. 30–32.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Monumental stone altars some six feet square, with horns at the corners large enough for one to cling to and thus be immovable’ have been excavated at Beersheba and Dan; W. G. Dever, ‘Archaeology and the Question of Sources in Kings’, in Lemaire and Halpern, p. 535.

blood of Uriah was shed (2 Sam. 11:14–25)! This undercuts Solomon's 'claiming to occupy the high moral ground', contrasting *Joab and his descendants* with *David and his descendants, his house and his throne* (v. 33). 'But *Realpolitik* is, of course, often dressed up in respectable clothing and presented as something better than it is.'<sup>51</sup>

With three potentially disloyal leaders removed – political, religious and military – the loyal *Benaiah* and *Zadok* are confirmed in their positions (v. 35). A potential threat remains in *Shimei* (v. 36), the only other person David specified (vv. 8–9). At first Shimei abides by Solomon's strict conditions: being confined to Jerusalem prevents him stirring up dissension, since to *cross the Kidron Valley*, going eastward, would be the route to his home territory of Benjamin. His breaking the conditions three years later seems to be unpremeditated and excusable, since the direction is westward and there is no hint that he sought to stir up any trouble (vv. 39–40). Solomon however sees an opportunity to act, another exercise of his 'wisdom'.

In reviewing this chapter, how are David and Solomon walking in the ways of Yahweh? We have noted questions concerning words and actions. Where is God? Yahweh is mentioned only in David's reference to Yahweh's earlier promise (v. 4), in Solomon's words justifying Adonijah's death on the ground of that promise (vv. 23–25), in Solomon's invoking Yahweh's 'repaying' in the cases of Joab (v. 32) and Shimei (v. 44), and his seeing Yahweh as giving 'peace' (v. 33). There is a messy mix of God's promises and justice being used to support human action, all moving towards the goal that *the kingdom was now established in Solomons hand* (v. 46). The only positive reference appears to be in the narrator's alerting to the fulfilment of prophecy (vv. 26–29).

David's charge, *Be strong . . . observe what the LORD your God requires* (vv. 2–3), has no outworking in the rest of chapter 2. Solomon's 'strength' has been evident in decisive removal of fellow Israelites who are seen to be a threat. It is left to the subsequent narrative for the charge to be renewed, by Yahweh himself. At this stage, his 'wisdom' is hardly informed by 'the ways of Yahweh' but by the last instructions of his father.

For readers today, the account provides a mirror to human behaviour in complex situations of power and leadership, with examples of questionable 'wisdom'. No direct answers are given, but we are helped to see below the surface and consider human motives and rationalizations, to see the ease with which God's words can be used to serve human ends. In fulfilment of prophecy we also see God at work in the midst of all.

<sup>51</sup> Provan, p. 39.