



I KINGS



Dale Ralph Davis





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Simon Gathercole





I KINGS

The Wisdom and the Folly



Dale Ralph Davis

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS





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Preface

First Kings covers such a swath of history, in royal time from the death of David to the death of Ahab, or in prophetic time from Nathan to Micaiah, blending together royal records, detailed descriptions, repetitive formulas, and tense narratives in the whole effort. I try to avoid both being aridly historical and sentimentally devotional. As with my previous commentaries, I seek to grasp the theological nerve of the text and cast it in an expository form, without being allergic to application.

One always owes thanks. I pushed one of my Hebrew exegesis classes through some of the least interesting material in 1 Kings just to see if we could preach it. They did grandly and proved an immense help to me. The powers that be at Reformed Seminary have accelerated the pace of writing by granting an eight-month sabbatical. Ken Elliott and John McCarty have been more than gracious with research space in 'their' library. And Ruth Bennett's sharp eye nailed numerous glitches and follies before the manuscript was in the mail.

The appearance of this volume coincides with a milestone. Knox Chamblin, my colleague in New Testament, will soon retire from full-time teaching duties at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi. He is both Jesus' disciple and Paul's admirer, as one should be. This book goes forth as a small tribute to Dr. Chamblin, for we have found and enjoyed him as a rigorous scholar, moving preacher, mischievous colleague, and gracious friend.

Dale Ralph Davis
Reformation Day 2000





Abbreviations

ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts</i> , 3 rd ed.
BDB	Brown, Driver, and Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>
DCH	<i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> (ed. D. J. A. Clines)
IDB	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
IDBS	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible/ Supplementary Volume</i>
ISBE	<i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
JB	Jerusalem Bible
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
KJV	King James Version
LXX	The Septuagint
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NBD	<i>New Bible Dictionary</i>
NIDOTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis</i>
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NJPS	Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the Traditional Hebrew Text (1985)
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
REB	Revised English Bible
RSV	Revised Standard Version
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
TEV	Today's English Version
TWOT	<i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i>
ZPEB	<i>Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible</i>



Introduction

Sorry about the title. It would be nice to call this volume *The Power and the Glory*, but 1 Kings' story of the sadness and stupidity of sin forbids it. The power and the glory is not yet. There is, to be sure, a flash of glory (Solomon) but it fades.

Bible readers who have braved their way through 1 and 2 Kings are sometimes dazed by the apparent maze of detail, especially when the writer takes us through the various kings of Israel and Judah, switching back and forth along the way. We can handle two Jeroboams in one kingdom and a Rehoboam in the other contemporary with one of the Jeroboams, but when there is a Jehoram (or Joram) in each kingdom at about the same time, not to mention double Ahaziahs, we go into historical overload. Like warm jello it all seems to melt into hopeless confusion. 'Too much history!', we sigh.

Not really. Actually, the writer has been very kind to us, deliberately trying to prevent cranial fatigue. No one has said it better than Charles Martin:

1 and 2 Kings ... give a continuous narrative of the Hebrew monarchy from the time when David handed on a rich and extensive kingdom to the time of its final destruction. Four hundred years in little more than 50,000 words means a drastic reduction of detail.¹

In other words, the writer of Kings left out most of what he could have said! Four hundred years in little more than 50,000 words. The history of my own country (USA) extends a little over half that long but its history is written in thick tomes not brief booklets (like 1–2 Kings). This means, as Martin says,

1. '1 and 2 Kings,' *The New Layman's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 425.



a drastic reduction of detail.' The writer of (1–2) Kings must be very *selective*, which implies that what he *does* include must be of vital importance. It also means the writer has no intention of providing us with an exhaustive history but maybe with a prophecy – a God-authorized version of how we should view that history.

I have imposed a policy of planned neglect on this treatment of 1–2 Kings. Temptation lurks in the text at every turn; one can easily get sucked into all the chronological, historical, and critical matters that beg attention and solution. But one must be rather ruthless about excluding these unless they directly affect the expositional task. In any case, such matters have been covered elsewhere.²

I should, however, explain a bit of terminology. The Books of Kings are part of what scholarly jargon calls the Deuteronomistic History, said to encompass the books of Deuteronomy–2 Kings (excluding Ruth). One influential view holds that this 'history' came out in two editions, one in King Josiah's time (ca. 622 BC), which may have been more hopeful, and one in the exilic period (ca. 550) in which the theme of condemnation was prominent. Most do not think of a single Deuteronomist living at one address. Scholars often posit a Deuteronomistic 'school' – these Deuteronomistic editors being at work from the late seventh century on into the exilic period. Now the 'Deuteronomistic History' is only a hypothesis and this is not the place to evaluate it. I myself have problems with its assumptions and its application. Usually (note the qualifier), those who follow this theory assume that the Book of Deuteronomy itself is a product of the seventh century BC rather than coming substantially (according to its own claim) from Moses. However, I primarily object to the way the theory's practitioners mangle the biblical text when using the theory allegedly to explain the text. One then realizes that one is dealing with a pool of deuteronomists, a 'prophetic' deuteronomist adding this snip, a legalistic one responsible for this verse or half-verse, and so on. The text becomes a collage,

2. See, to begin, David M. Howard, Jr., *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* (Chicago: Moody, 1993), 169–229.



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a product of multiple contributors grinding their specialized deuteronomistic axes. Such detailed theorizing is largely guesswork. Even that might be stomached if, at the end of it all, such writers looked at the text as a whole and told us how it addresses us as the word of God. This they rarely do.

Readers will run into other terminology, which I hope will be clear in the context. Occasionally, one will bump into terms like 'hermeneutics' or 'hermeneutical,' which I use in a non-technical sense, the former referring to the process of interpretation, the latter as synonymous with 'interpretive.'

First and Second Kings were originally one book. We don't know who the author was (some prefer to speak of authors). He used earlier materials for his work, but the whole work cannot date earlier than 560 BC since the final composition must post-date Babylon's smashing of Judah and Jerusalem in 2 Kings 24–25. The material of 1–2 Kings falls into three major chunks:

- I. The Golden Age, 1 Kings 1–11
- II. The Torn Kingdom, 1 Kings 12–2 Kings 17
- III. The Last Days, 2 Kings 18–25

Let us hurry to the text.







Part I

The Golden Age

1 Kings 1–11







Kingdom, Kingdom, Who's Got the Kingdom? (1 Kings 1)

Some days he would simply sit, moody and depressed, for long periods of time, and matters of state were allowed to slide. It was 1724, in Russia, Peter the Great within a year of his death. Unless Peter's motor would drive affairs, very little was done. Unfortunately, now his motor seemed to idle in neutral. A diplomat wrote back to his home government, reporting that currently in Russia nothing was considered important until it came to the edge of a precipice.¹

We meet a similar scene about 970 BC, recorded in the first four verses of our passage. Here is an old, cold king who seems not to be long for this world. We cannot even be sure if the heat therapy administered by the stunning Abishag was effective.² Not a promising beginning.

Before jumping into an exposition of the chapter let us review a literary map of the narrative and add a few footnotes about the manner of the story.

1. Robert K. Massie, *Peter the Great: His Life and World* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), 865.

2. I am aware that a number of scholars look on vv. 1-4 as a virility test that David failed, i.e. if super-model Abishag could not get David excited, then his loss of sexual prowess was a sign of his inability to rule. But this more sensational view has to be divined into the text. David's problem in the text is body heat not dysfunctional sexuality; and verse 4c ('But the king did not know her [sexually]') reads more like a simple qualification than a failure to succeed.



Proposed Structure of 1 Kings 1

- Setting, vv. 1-4
- Adonijah's royal party, vv. 5-10
 - Informing the ignorant king, vv. 11-27
 - Plan, 11-14
 - Bathsheba's speech, 15-21
 - Nathan's speech, 22-27
 - The king's decision, vv. 28-37
 - Announcement to Bathsheba, 28-30
(response by Bathsheba, 31)
 - Announcement to Zadok & Co., 32-35
(response by Benaiah, 36-37)
 - Execution of the king's decision, vv. 38-40
 - Informing the ignorant pretender, vv. 41-48
 - The party's over, vv. 49-53

Some (additional) observations: (1) The prevalence of *speeches* (Bathsheba, vv. 15-21; Nathan, vv. 11-14, 22-27; David, vv. 28-31, 32-35; Jonathan, vv. 41-48); the writer tells much of his story through the mouths of lead characters; (2) how the writer engages in *repetition*, e.g. via David's speech (vv. 33-35), his own report (vv. 38-40), and Jonathan's speech (vv. 43-48); and (3) the dominant idea of 'sitting on the throne and ruling' mentioned nine times (vv. 13, 17, 20, 24, 27, 30, 35, 46, 48). Other repeated vocabulary occurs, but this last is the central theme: Who's got the kingdom? And the central contention of the text is: *Yahweh maintains his kingdom in all its precarious moments*. Now for some expository reflections.

The Peril that Threatens the Kingdom (vv. 1-10)

Not all kings are decrepit like David in verses 1-4. Note the contrast between verses 1 and 5. Adonijah is everything David is not. Here is a vigorous would-be king! He has ambition (v. 5a), style (5b), image (6b), position (6c, apparently next in

line by order of birth), and support (7, 9 – both military and religious, among others).

At one level the writer simply describes Adonijah and his activity. It seems a very objective, here-are-the-facts description. I hold, however, that he takes a negative view of Adonijah – especially if he means us to view him in light of preceding texts or traditions. The writer's description of Adonijah's fine looks recalls the glossy word picture of Absalom in 2 Samuel 14:25-27, as well as the depictions of Saul (1 Sam. 9:2; 10:23-24) and Eliab (1 Sam. 16:6-7). All these royal or potentially royal persons were physically impressive and either disastrous or rejected. Adonijah, our writer implies, belongs to that class. Moreover, Adonijah's freedom from discipline (v. 6a) reflects both on David and himself and places him in the category of Amnon (2 Sam. 13:21), who was high in glands but low on brains and restraint.³

Several applications arise from the text. The first is an observation: the kingdom of God frequently passes through precarious moments in this world. It may be the passing of Joseph and the rise of bondage (Gen. 50 – Exod. 1), the death of Moses and the transition to Joshua (Deut. 34 – Josh. 1), the burial of Joshua and the apostasy to Baal worship (Josh. 24 – Judg. 2) – others are not lacking. The situation in our text is one of them. Here in David's nearing death is a transition point in the kingdom of God, one of those critical situations where a wrong move, a false step, a stupid turn, could spell disaster. It seems that the contemporary church might benefit from this text. How frequently we are deluged with the various crises the church faces, with the perils she must meet in days of unprecedented moral decadence, ethical relativism, global upheaval, or whatever. I do not wish to downplay the crisis element in 1 Kings 1 or at any time among the people of God, but the church has repeatedly passed through such times when she has had to walk on the edge of disaster. Apparently, there is a hand that steadies her.

3. This comparison with Amnon is more explicit if one follows LXX at 2 Samuel 13:21, as does REB: 'but he [David] would not hurt Amnon because he was his eldest son and he loved him.'

The text also suggests that the kingdom of God can suffer from unqualified leadership. When Peter the Great (allow me to re-resurrect him) wanted to launch a Russian navy at Archangel on the White Sea, he promoted three of his comrades to high office, appointing them as admiral, vice admiral, and rear admiral, respectively. The first two had never been on a boat, but the last, Patrick Gordon, a Scotsman in Peter's service, had had nautical experience. He had been a passenger on ships crossing the English Channel!⁴

Our writer (for reasons given previously) sees Adonijah as unqualified for kingdom leadership. There is far more to it than saying, 'I will be king' (v. 5). Lust for power and position are not the marks for leadership among God's people.

I think there is an applicational spillover here for the church. In 1 Timothy 3, Paul lays down qualifications for church leaders, elders, deacons, and deaconesses (or deacons' wives). Isn't it telling that those qualifications almost totally stress godliness rather than giftedness, character rather than skills? Nor should we delude ourselves by thinking Adonijah is dead in the church. He lives under a different name perhaps. Do we not find him in 3 John 9-10 in Diotrephes, 'who loves to be first' (NIV), using his royal tyranny to domineer and boss the congregation? Adonijah still struts in the church. He may be the elder who can't distinguish between authority and authoritarianism; he may be corporate – the one 'family' that runs the church; or he may be the dominant dame, the woman who either visibly or cryptically calls the shots.

The Servants who Love the Kingdom (vv. 11-27)

Adonijah's party is in full swing at En-rogel (v. 9), a spring several hundred yards south of the City of David. Not everyone, however, is at Adonijah's party or on his bandwagon.

Nathan the prophet decides something must be done to alert the uninformed king about the state of affairs. So he goes to Bathsheba and briefs her on his plan. The narrative falls into three chunks: (1) Nathan to Bathsheba, vv 11-14; (2) Bathsheba to David, vv. 15-21; and (3) Nathan to David, vv. 22-27.

4. Massie, *Peter the Great*, 134.

Bathsheba is to inform the king of Adonijah's coup-in-progress, and Nathan will come in and, in line with the at-least-two-witnesses requirement (Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6; 19:15), confirm her story (v. 14).

Apparently, David had gone on oath to Bathsheba, assuring her that Solomon would succeed him as king (v. 17). But David had taken no public action in this regard, and, while David shivered and vegetated, Adonijah decided to make a move and present Israel with a *fait accompli*. Adonijah also surely knew that Solomon was privately the favored successor; otherwise, one cannot explain his excluding Solomon from his invitation list (vv. 10, 19, 26). Nathan and Bathsheba were probably right to infer from this fact that once Adonijah reigned Solomon would be eliminated (vv. 12, 21).⁵ So now (at the end of v. 27) the king knows what he didn't know and knows the danger in which his own faithful servants, and especially Bathsheba and Solomon, stand.⁶

How crucial Nathan's role (vv. 11ff.) is in this story! He even had to inform Bathsheba. Looking back on the whole affair, everything rests on Nathan. He not only intervened but had a plan by which to stir David to action. Nathan was the man who stood in the gap – his vigilance goaded David off his couch and protected Bathsheba and Solomon from almost certain death. One non-royal servant makes the difference and preserves the kingdom.

5. 'The pointed exclusion of Nathan, Benaiah and his officers ... and Solomon from the meal at En Rogel indicates that Adonijah was not prepared for "peaceful coexistence", to which, by ancient Semitic convention, he would have been committed by such a meal. He obviously trusted in the strength of his party to liquidate the opposition (cf. v. 12)...' (John Gray, *I & II Kings*, Old Testament Library, 2nd ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970], 84).

6. I am aware of the hermeneutics-of-suspicion approach to Nathan's intervention. Such expositors view Nathan as a ruthless conspirator who is 'pulling a deception on the senile king' (Nelson). The vow David is said to have sworn (vv. 13, 17) is something Nathan and/or Bathsheba have made up out of whole cloth to deceive and exploit the infirm king. See Walter Brueggemann, *1 Kings*, Knox Preaching Guides (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 4-6; Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1987), 19-20; and Tomoo Ishida, 'Solomon's Succession to the Throne of David – A Political Analysis,' in *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon and Other Essays*, ed. Tomoo Ishida (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1982), 178-79.

Trouble was brewing in Richmond. It was 1863 and some of the women in the Confederate capital were incensed over the rise in food prices. They decided to protest. Minerva Meredith, a butcher's assistant, six feet tall and brandishing a navy revolver and a Bowie knife, led the rampage. Some three hundred women plus children screaming, 'Bread! Bread!' rioted, smashing plate-glass windows and carting off – not surprisingly – far more than food from the shops. They ignored the mayor's warning, as well as a company of militia that threatened to fire on them. Then a few of them noticed a tall thin man in gray walk up and climb on to a loaded cart and begin to address the mob in no uncertain terms. They quieted when they saw him empty his pockets and throw money in their direction. 'You say you are hungry and have no money. Here is all I have. It is not much, but take it.' Then, with open watch in hand and an eye on the company of militia, he assured the furious females that he wanted no one injured. Nevertheless the lawlessness must stop. He held his watch. They had five minutes to disperse – then they would be fired on. The women knew he was not given to idle threats and within five minutes all targets had vanished. So Jeff Davis, president of the Confederacy, dispersed a mob. The difference one man made.⁷

That is the situation in 1 Kings 1: Everything, humanly speaking, hinges on Nathan. I do not think we should use this text as a piece of Christian cheer-leading or religious rah-rah. I don't think the text is grabbing me by the lapels telling me to 'become a Nathan.' But surely it implies that one's service in Christ's kingdom has a real dignity about it and that one can never tell how crucial one servant's labor may prove to be. Surely a Lord who remembers cups of water handed to his people (Mark 9:41) does not think lightly of our faithfulness, major or minor.

The Zeal that Preserves the Kingdom (vv. 28-40)

What a change comes over David! When Bathsheba had first come in (v. 16), David, as though out of gas (petrol), gets out

7. Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative*, vol. 2: *Fredericksburg to Meridian* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 163-64.

two Hebrew syllables, literally translated, 'What to you?' But at verse 28 he is full of gusto: calling for Bathsheba (v. 28), reaffirming his previous oath to her (vv. 29-30); calling for Zadok, Nathan, and Benaiah (v. 32); giving detailed orders for anointing and installing Solomon as king (vv. 33-35) – all of which were executed with vigor and dispatch (vv. 38-40). David was not doddering but decisive: '*he* will reign in my place, and I have ordered *him* to be leader over Israel and over Judah' (v. 35, emphasis in Hebrew). That takes care of the major issue (see discussion of literary features/themes at beginning of this chapter). God was the one who would establish David's dynasty (2 Sam. 7:12-16), and yet that assurance seems to call for a component of human responsibility. God had promised David a kingdom and dynasty, and David dare not be apathetic toward what happened to it.

This section suggests two matters for reflection. First, it was the fate (I speak loosely) of the kingdom that stirred David to action. What stirs us, as kingdom servants, to life? What catches our zeal? Our portfolio? The auto shop that still hasn't correctly diagnosed and repaired my ailing vehicle? Inability to find just the right drapes? Your high school football team blew its chance to make the district playoffs? Do the *first* three petitions of the Lord's Prayer move, grip, and stir us? What stirs us reveals us. And must we not confess that frequently only our comfort zone has the ability to ignite any real zeal in us?

Secondly, notice how much of the narrative – not only in this section but in the whole story so far – describes nothing but human activity. Adonijah's quest for the throne is met by Nathan's vigilance and countered by the orders of a resurrected David. But there is little if any reference to divine intervention. As Ronald Wallace has put it:

Yet God had made no spectacularly miraculous intervention in human affairs. He had not struck Adonijah down with any sudden illness nor had he sent a bolt of lightning from heaven to spoil his celebration. At the right time, and in the right situation he had simply inspired minds with thoughts that moved them

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on, and given the exact words that were required to turn events in the right direction.⁸

Why is God's hand so invisible, his ways so hidden? Why does he seem to allow things to take their course rather than put things right? Why does he seemingly commit to fragile human hands such critical matters? Why do we constantly long for one of the days of the Son of Man and never see it (cf. Luke 17:22)?

The Submission that Marks the Kingdom (vv. 41-53)

Adonijah and his cronies all hear the racket up in the city but haven't a clue about its meaning until Jonathan, Abiathar's son, arrives. Jonathan must have been on site for most of Solomon's coronation; he even has intelligence about conversations and statements. But his first words contain the long and the short of it: 'Our lord King David has made Solomon king' (v. 43). End of party (v. 49). Everyone scurries or slinks home to begin looking like ideal citizens in Solomon's kingdom. Adonijah himself submits and is allowed to live in spite of his attempt to seize the kingdom for himself (vv. 50-53).⁹

Now not everything is peaches and cream at this point, but to date Adonijah has made the proper response. That is all that is required. So long as he continues this submission he is safe (v. 52). Yet we know there can be such a thing as an outward, external submission that stands miles apart from a glad, internal one, a formal submission given because of conditions or circumstances – something like the sixty-seven standing ovations Ceausescu of Romania once received during a five-hour speech.¹⁰ In the latter case no one would imagine such tedium could call forth totally genuine enthusiasm.

8. *Readings in 1 Kings* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 7. Johannes Fichtner nicely points out the hints of sovereign work amid the barrage of human activity (*Das erste Buch von den Königen*, Die Botschaft des Alten Testaments, 2nd ed. [Stuttgart: Calwer, 1979], 46).

9. One can understand the picture we have here as a foreshadowing of what is to come, when every knee will bow, whether voluntarily or necessarily, before the final Davidic king, Jesus (Isa. 45:23; Phil. 2:9-11).

10. Paul Johnson, *Modern Times*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 761.



Do not believing parents face this concern with their children? From birth we teach them the Scriptures, the doctrines and precepts of the faith, including the kingship of Jesus, and they usually assent to all this. Even into their teen years there is this general acceptance of what has been taught. And that is not disappointing! It's not like we want them to go become Baal worshipers to prove how authentic they are. But there is a subtle concern: Will what has been taught not merely be acknowledged but embraced? Will the catechetical become the experiential? Will there be more than outward assent? Will they sit in willing bonds at Jesus' feet?

