A Muscular Exploration Of The Family History

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My Personal Review:
There is a tendency at times to thumb through a book and say--"I could never handle this." My hope would be that no one succumbs to that temptation with this volume. Simon DeVries' commentary addresses 1 Kings from about every angle possible. There is critical analysis of the Hebrew text itself, a veritable plethora of scholarly sources, lengthy discussions on matters of chronology and dating, secular sources, worship and politics, and the nature of prophesy, to cite a few. The format is more technical than narrative. In short, there is no spoon feeding.

There are, perhaps, simpler means to enter the mysterious world of 1 Kings, but not necessarily better ones. DeVries makes certain that no reader can content himself with superficial impressions, deprive himself of the richness of the text, or shortchange himself of the profound theology that drives the narrative. The insightful reader of the 1 Kings texts--with or without DeVries' assistance--will no doubt have many questions about the intriguing twists and turns in a book that ostensibly focuses upon a single religious/political entity. This commentary anticipates those questions and, with its summations of current [2003] scholarly literature, provides the best consensus of understandings.

The two canonical books under the name "Kings' are part of a continuous narrative of Israel's history. 1 Kings begins in the middle of things, so to speak, and DeVries is in agreement with other scholars that chapters one
and two would probably be better placed at the conclusion of 2 Samuel, treating as they do of the tense succession from David to Solomon. 1 Kings narrates events of 980-850 B.C., with 2 Kings continuing the narrative rather seamlessly. The primary sources are twofold; the author identifies the Deuteronomistic tradition or "D" source with a separate "throne-succession" source [xxxiii]. Theologically speaking, the sentiment of "D" carries the work: kings and their works will be judged by fidelity to the Mosaic Covenant as summarized in the Book of Deuteronomy itself. Both 1 and 2 Kings appear to be post-exile interpretations which place the blame for national catastrophes upon a loss of fidelity to Yahweh.

In 2 Kings the reader will see these catastrophes up close. In DeVries' treatment of 1 Kings, we get a look at the highlight of the dynasty of Israel and the beginnings of its decline, including the division into a northern and southern kingdom. Despite the universal personification of the kingship with David, practically speaking the high water mark of the throne is the reign of Solomon. Nearly half of 1 Kings is devoted to the ruler who actually achieved what his father David had hoped to do. After settling the unfinished business of his father in chapters one and two, Solomon proceeds to establish himself with the threefold blessings of personal wisdom, a relatively peaceful international setting [which he himself helped to facilitate], and a strong working relationship with Yahweh. His famous settlement of the disputed baby is inserted early [1 Kings 3:16] to give us a measure of the man and what his rule must have been like.

In truth, however, much of the Solomon text is administrative in nature, and specifically in regard to the diplomatic and logistic detail of construction of the Temple. The biblical text and its subject are extravagant, though DeVries notes that the D author labors to maintain the Davidic religious tradition, such as the inclusion of David's holy items or "booty" among the sacred furnishings of the new edifice. [127] The sacred author is generally quite forgiving of Solomon, who in truth was a deficit spender, international player, and a somewhat lax protector of covenantal purity, and by 1 Kings 11 even Yahweh has had enough of him.

However, it cannot be said that his successors were improvements. The first, Rehoboam, faces popular discontent and then flaunts established protocols of the Levitic priesthood. The divisions among the people are so great that Israel actually becomes two kingdoms at this point. Interestingly, at this juncture there appears the heroic figure of the solitary religious critic and the beginnings of that unique biblical type, the classical prophet. [1 Kings 12]. Solitary prophesy does not make its first Biblical appearance here in 1 Kings--Nathan's intervention with David over Bathsheba/Uriah certainly comes to mind--but in this biblical text the prophets begin to serve as the anima to the kingly animus. DeVries, who has written extensively on classical prophesy, provides a detailed excursus on prophetic identity as a prelude to chapters 17-20. [206ff.]
In 1 Kings, the prophet who overshadows the kingly chronicle is Elijah, whose grandiose miracles serve as weapons against the works of Baal. One can see why Elijah [and later, in 2 Kings, Elisha] would capture the Deuteronomic imagination as a counterbalance to over a century of kings who "displeased Yahweh." Elisha makes his appearance in 1 Kings 19 as a protégé of Elijah. 1 Kings 20 returns to the chronicle of mediocre to outright poor monarchs, now in a parallel northern/southern contrast that will continue, with tragic outcomes, in 2 Kings.

DeVries' treatment of 1 Kings is the twelfth volume of the Word Biblical Commentary, a major enterprise begun in 1977. This volume is a revised edition of an earlier work by the same author in 1985. The series is sponsored by the National Council of Churches for a Christian audience. DeVries, however, in his 1985 preface repeated in this volume makes a very significant pastoral point: it is impossible to put faith in Christ unless we know him, and Christ embodies the history of Israel, including the events and personages who compose the corpus of 1 Kings. Thus, we must embrace this tradition as our own. It is worth the work.

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