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The Gospel of 1-2 Kings

INTRODUCTION

Christians usually think of the book of 1-2 Kings as “historical,” and Jews have long classified it as “prophetic.” For Christians, 1-2 Kings is above all about the gospel.

FORMER PROPHET

Because the Jewish classification of Kings may be unfamiliar, we should spend a bit of time examining it. Kings is prophetic, first, in the sense that prophets play a large role in the story. There are 10 named prophets, lots of unnamed ones, and the careers of Elijah and Elisha occupy a large central section of the book. Further, the history of Israel and Judah is shaped by the prophetic word and its fulfillment, and by the kings’ response to that word. Israel’s prophets came with a particular message. It is not a message of moral reformation: “Straighten out, or you’re gonna get it.” The prophets came with a message of death: Israel has come under the curse of the covenant, which is death, and her only hope is that Yahweh will raise the dead.

KNOCKING OUT THE PROPS

In keeping with this prophetic emphasis, 1-2 Kings systematically subverts all the institutions that Israel might be tempted to trust in. Think that a wise king will preserve Israel’s prosperity and peace? Take a look at Solomon. Think that prophets will save Israel? They might, but no one listens to them. Think that keeping the Law will save Israel? Take a look at Josiah, the perfect Law-keeper, who cannot save Judah from destruction. Think that the Temple will save Israel? Tell me again about that heap of smoldering ruins on the mountain of Jerusalem. When Israel breaks covenant, Israel dies. And when Israel dies, neither king nor temple nor Torah can bring her back to life.

1-2 KINGS AND THE GOSPEL

1-2 Kings is a gospel text in part because it points Israel to her only source of hope, new life, and renewal: Yahweh. 1-2 Kings is also a gospel text because of what it reveals about Yahweh, God of Israel. First, it reveals a God whose patience with His people is uncanny. Yahweh warns Solomon that the temple will be destroyed if Solomon turns from Him (1 Kings 9), but several centuries pass before the temple is destroyed (2 Kings 25). The man of God from Judah warns Jeroboam about a king named Josiah who will destroy Jeroboam’s altar (1 Kings 13), but Josiah doesn’t come for centuries (2 Kings 22-23). Yahweh tells Elijah that He will raise up avengers to destroy the house of Ahab (1 Kings 19), but years pass before they appear. Kings does not reveal a God with a hair-trigger temper; it reveals a God who is, if anything, irresponsibly indulgent toward His favored people.

Second, 1-2 Kings reveals a God who is faithful to His promises to David’s house. Again and again, David’s house is nearly destroyed. The kingdom divides, and David’s house is left with two tribes. Athaliah kills all the princes of the Davidic dynasty (2 Kings 11), but the Lord preserves Joash by the skin of his teeth. Assyria destroys Samaria (2 Kings 17) and threatens Jerusalem, but Yahweh delivers (2 Kings 18-19). Babylon destroys Jerusalem, but the last scene of 1-2 Kings shows Jehoiachin elevated above all the captive kings in Babylon.

Here is the gospel of 1-2 Kings: The long-suffering God of Israel will not leave David in the grave; on the third day, he will rise again. And Yahweh alone will have the glory.

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