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## Book Review: 1 and 2 Kings

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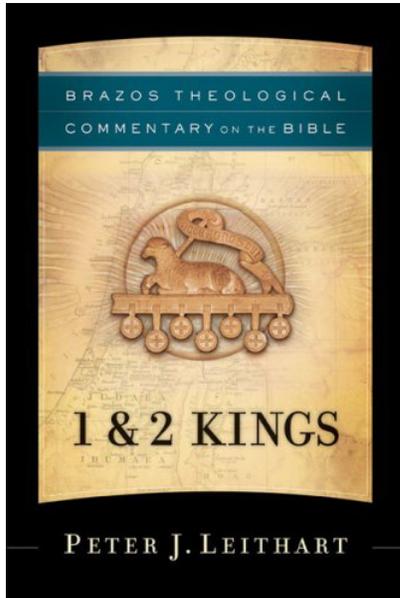
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**Leithart, Peter J.**

***1 and 2 Kings***

Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible

Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006. Pp. 304. Cloth. \$29.99.  
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According to the series preface by R. R. Reno at the beginning of this volume, the “central premise” in the Brazos Theological Commentary does not revolve around a set exegetical or historical approach to the Scriptures. Rather, the common denominator “is that doctrine provides structure and cogency to scriptural interpretation” (12). Thus, the goal of the series is to show how an appropriate reading of the Scriptures for the church is guided by the Nicene tradition. Intrigued by the aspirations of the series, I was eager to read the second volume in the series and to observe how a Christian reading of 1 and 2 Kings would be accomplished. In light of the expectations from the preface, Leithart has done an admirable job in presenting such a reading of Kings. I would like to frame my observations around three areas: presentation, hermeneutics, and theological conclusions.

After an introduction, which will be discussed below, Leithart breaks 1 and 2 Kings into thirty-nine short chapters each ranging from five to ten pages. He openly recognizes the insufficiency of his comments, recognizing his effort to be “deeply inadequate and incomplete” (13). In order for the reader to avoid a limited view of Kings, he recommends that the commentary be read with the Scriptures in hand and with the assistance of other commentaries. This is welcome advice, because reading Leithart’s work presupposes some exposure to and understanding of the book of Kings. Yet, while the brevity of his

comments has forced him to remain succinct, the profundity of his theological observations does not suffer.

Reflecting the fact that much of Leithart's exposure to Kings has been within the context of teaching in the church, his book often reads more like a set of homilies or sermons than as a technical commentary. Each chapter usually begins—as a sermon normally would—with a brief discussion or illustration showing why the text at hand should have an impact upon the reader, specifically within the environment of the church. As such, Leithart consistently shows how the ancient book of Kings should be read within the contemporary context of the community of faith.

Turning to remarks about hermeneutics, most observations would have to be made from simply reading the commentary, because he does not provide an introduction describing his methodology. There are several aspects that I would discuss.

First, Leithart presents a reading that avoids the pitfalls of critical methodologies. For one who reads about and teaches the Old Testament for a living, the book at hand offers a refreshing read. The reader will not face a consistent barrage of source, form, and redaction discussions. Yet in making his conclusion, it is obvious that Leithart has more than a cursory knowledge of the text. That is, his process was not simply to force a New Testament reading onto the Old Testament text. He has clearly thought deeply about how the book coheres as well as how 1 and 2 Kings fits within the larger context of the Old Testament story. In my opinion, this quality of the book is a greater contribution than the larger theological observations he makes in attempting to make a Christian reading of the text. For example, he does an excellent analysis of Jehu as a messianic figure (219–24). In a manner of speaking, his Old Testament theology is more cogent than his biblical theology. Yet at the same time, his ability to make significant observations about parallels within the book of Kings and the Old Testament enhances his discussion about parallels with the New Testament.

Second, Leithart reads the text from a consistent literary point of view. He is particularly adept at recognizing parallels, wordplays, and literary devices that bring out the meaning of the text. In his hermeneutic, these are the most valuable contributions throughout the chapter. Yet at times they seem overdone. For example, if one were to thumb casually through the commentary without even reading a word, one would find that a favored literary device of Leithart is chiasmic structure. On both smaller and larger levels, Leithart's conclusions often rest on the observation of some type of chiasm. Although some are based upon remarks made by others, there are some twenty-seven chiasmic structures identified throughout the book. His conclusions are often interesting and profound, but some feel strained and less obvious.

Third, the most promising aspect of Leithart's commentary is that he deals exclusively with the text that lies before him. As such, the text is more than simply an object of literary study but is read in such a way as if he believes what it says and receives it as authoritative. Thus, he makes serious inquiries into the nature of faith (107), the problem of evil (135), and the character of God (e.g., 182–83). In fact, at times, I was surprised to see how forcefully he brings its message upon the modern church.

Leithart's theological conclusions about the book of Kings are diverse and interesting. He demonstrates a breadth of reading and knowledge of theological matters and brings that knowledge to bear upon the book of Kings. One theological conclusion touches on both hermeneutical and theological perspectives in that the primary means by which a Christian reading is provided is through a typological reading of Kings. Thus, Leithart points out many analogies to the person of Christ, the work of Christ, and the nature of the church. According to Leithart, for example, the picture of Israel as developed in Kings is a picture of the modern church, because it is "history of the *people* of God" (24). Thus, Leithart deems it important to show how the message typifies the state of the church today. On the one hand, divided Israel typifies divided Christendom, and this message comes through on several occasions throughout the book as Leithart calls for "ecclesial reunion." On the other hand, Israel in exile, as the book of Kings leaves them, becomes a picture of the church exiled in modernity. To be more specific, the church rests comfortably, enjoying its modern forms of idolatry. He concludes: "The book of Kings leaves Israel east of Eden, awaiting a return that is not yet come. And so it leaves us, a divided Christendom exiled in modern secularism, enduring the times of the Gentiles. It leaves us in exile, but it does not leave us without hope of return" (279).

In a very helpful introduction to the commentary entitled, "1–2 Kings as Gospel," Leithart summarizes the theological purposes of the book. As a prophetic book, Kings "systematically dismantles Israel's confidence in everything but the omnipotent mercy and patience of God" (18). Thus, the message of the book is not a legalistic call back to the stipulations of the covenant cut at Sinai but a call to faith in the God who provides new life. Moreover, this prophetic book shows the insufficiency of wisdom to save from division, the failure of a last-ditched effort to maintain Torah to save from destruction, and the folly of trusting in the security of the temple (20).

Leithart then turns to show that a Christian reading is possible because Kings "points to, anticipates, and foreshadows the gospel of Jesus the Christ" (20). The message is ultimately an evangelical message in that it displays both the judgment and long-suffering of God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the need for a king who would possess divine wisdom. Ultimately, then, the prophetic message of the book of Kings is fulfilled in Christ, and the book must be interpreted in light of this truth.

The merit of Leithart's commentary is not in providing a comprehensive survey and exegetical discussion of the book. Other commentaries offer that. For the biblical scholar, this volume is a fitting reminder that the text should be read holistically and theologically. There is much with which one may disagree, perhaps specifically with his exegetical methodology. However, I believe the book causes the reader to think profoundly about the ultimate message(s) of the text. For the pastor, Leithart's commentary will provide a succinct summary of each chapter or section that is most helpful in preaching through the book. For the theologian, Leithart has shown how even the book of Kings makes weighty theological statements based upon a text-imminent, Christian reading of the book. Moreover, for all, it is a delightful read.