Hens-Piazza, Gina

1-2 Kings

Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries

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In a very brief introduction, the author identifies historical and literary “considerations” in the books of Kings and discusses these books as a theological work. She mentions the alternate positions of Noth and Cross on the Deuteronomistic History, without choosing between them, and the commentary itself does not really address this issue. She traces back the conditional and unconditional promises contained in the Deuteronomistic History to Moses and David, respectively.

The commentary is nontechnical—no new translation, textual criticism, use of Hebrew, or footnotes—and each section (usually a chapter) is divided into “Literary Analysis,” “Exegetical Analysis,” and “Theological and Ethical Analysis.”

In the segment called “Literary Analysis,” the author summarizes the section under consideration and identifies its component parts. One might have expected more detailed use of the tools of narrative criticism here. The exegetical sections will prove useful to lay readers but will provide few new insights to scholars or even seminary students (the book jacket claims the series is aimed at theological students, pastors, and upper-level college or university students). For example, it was astonishing to read the exegesis of 2 Kgs 18–19 and to find no reference to Sennacherib’s annals, which have created one of the most
debated historical issues in the monarchical period. While the author contends that “story” rather than “history” is the operative genre in the books of Kings (2), I doubt if one can really understand that story if one brackets out what we no know today about the biblical world. She claims that Josiah’s Passover was the first time this feast had been observed since the time of the judges (388), while, of course, 2 Kgs 23:22 states only that “no such Passover,” that is, a Passover at the central sanctuary, had been observed since then. That leaves the “Theological and Ethical Analysis,” where I will concentrate my remarks and which I found generally disappointing.

Often the theological and ethical analysis merely points to moral lessons to be learned, with little explicit Christian theology evident. While she notes the dual nature of David’s farewell speech in 1 Kgs 2—what I would call his appeal to covenant loyalty and his brutal Realpolitik—her suggestion that David’s instruction on covenant implied love of God and love of neighbor and that Israel’s theocracy is meant to gradually yield a communitarian people rather than the hierarchy of monarchy (34) seems not at all based on this text. Her laconic theological and ethical note on 1 Kgs 18—“The Lord’s fire falling from the heaven does not conclude the episode; rather, Elijah’s slaughter of the Baal prophets caps it” (183)—misses a golden opportunity to comment on the dangers of religious extremism and even on the potential problems inherent in monotheism that have been much discussed in recent years and that are perhaps the global issue today. Her comments on 1 Kgs 12 (the rise of Jeroboam) would have been helped by deeper penetration into the actual strategy of Jeroboam and not to settle for the Deuteronomistic polemical distortion of his deeds. She writes that “Jeroboam’s heart needed to fix on the Lord,” that “[his actions] are an expression of his faulty confidence in exterior accoutrements as insurance of his popular reception as king,” and that “Religious formalism devoid of a heart set on the Lord leads on to the catastrophic outcome of personal and national demise” (130). But did not Jeroboam make a rather orthodox confession of Yahweh and his deliverance of Israel at the exodus, only his Yahweh was enthroned on a golden bull rather than a cherub? Finally, her comment on Manasseh seems to be missing an infinitive in its first clause, and its call for modern repentance seems lame: “As the account here calls those who read and reflect upon this difficult story of Manasseh’s turning away from God, it may also summon us to reflect upon our own need for repentance” (381).