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Book Review: 1-2 Kings

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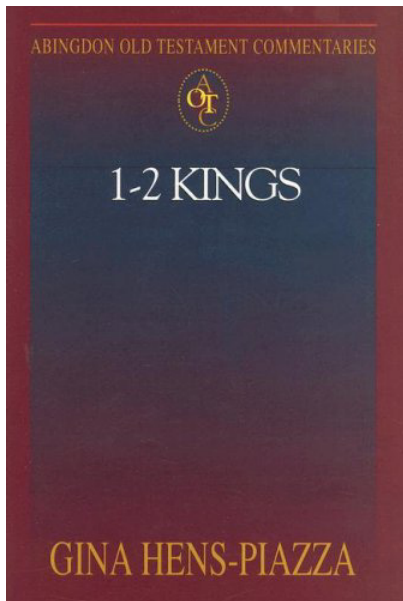
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Hens-Piazza, Gina

1-2 Kings

Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries

Nashville: Abingdon, 2006. Pp. xx + 407. Paper. \$36.00.
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Having read and interacted with the recent contribution of Peter J. Leithart on 1 and 2 Kings, I was eager to read and compare the work at hand. Leithart's commentary was clearly set within the grid of understanding the theological contribution of Kings to the church. The work in the Abingdon Old Testament Commentary series on 1-2 Kings, by Gina Hens-Piazza, takes a somewhat different look at these books, in that she applies a literary approach to the text. At the same time, she attempts to derive from Kings her own theological and ethical contribution.

The structure of this well-written commentary is simple. After a brief introduction that is interesting but not very comprehensive, Hens-Piazza carefully walks chapter by chapter throughout this large tome. Each chapter begins with a short introductory paragraph before commenting on the passage in three sections: literary analysis, exegetical analysis, and theological and ethical analysis. The literary analysis of each chapter is well-done. It frames the text, gives the big picture, and delineates the narrative units. For the most part, the exegetical analyses will leave the Hebrew student and/or scholar a little disappointed, for these sections are less exegetically rigorous and more literarily focused. This does not mean that the comments are not useful, only that they make the commentary more appropriate for those students reading the English Bible.

For the most part, each brief chapter can be read independently of the others, which is both a strength and possible weakness. On the one hand, having chapters that can be read as individual essays is a great resource for those reading through the book. Students and pastors will welcome the fact that they can simply open the text to the chapter at hand without having to wade through multiple chapters to gain the context. The commentary is easily accessible. On the other hand, having a collection of individual essays may detract from the larger context of the book and thereby produce a reading that is perhaps not intended by the Deuteronomist. For example, in considering 1 Kgs 2 both in her exegetical analysis as well as her theological reflections on the passage, Hens-Piazza goes to great lengths to show that Solomon has taken the throne with questionable motives, with unjust actions, and without the theological approval of the author. However, at the same time, taking up commentary on 1 Kgs 3 and following, she shows that the Deuteronomist goes to equally great lengths to portray Solomon as the ideal king. As a result, is it not possible that the author refrained from negative comments about the events of the previous chapter because his intention is to show how Solomon was the rightful heir to the throne in his eyes and, by virtue of the context of the rest of the Solomon narrative, in the eyes of Yahweh? In other words, is not the theological conclusion of the Deuteronomist that which is portrayed in the larger context? Granted, if one rips 1 Kgs 2 out of the context and reads and interprets it alone, one would indeed come to Hens-Piazza's conclusion. Moreover, it is clear that the text does not laud these actions or commend them as a pattern for the reader. My only point is that an ethical evaluation of Solomon's actions is not the author's point. Such a preoccupation with commenting on individual pericopes must be augmented consistently by setting the context. At times Hens-Piazza does this well, but at times the theological and ethical reflections upon the text suffer because of this.

In my opinion, the most glaring weakness of the book is indeed the theological and ethical reflection. To be fair, not all readers will share this view. However, at times I was left scratching my head in bewilderment at what I had just read. Granted, this is perhaps because the theological reflection is taken from a different perspective, which may be attributed in part to the plurality of perspectives that come from her diverse student body (xix). That is, the question she seems to be asking is not about how the Deuteronomist's theological perspective should be understood but rather how the stories should be reinterpreted through the lens of the social, ethical, and theological perspective of our age. An example of this reinterpretation is found in the comments on 1 Kgs 3, where Solomon judges between the two women. Out of nowhere, Hens-Piazza's focus shifts from that story as a demonstration of Solomon's God-given wisdom to questioning Solomon's tactics and insinuating that it is really the mother's compassion that may be the focus of the passage. However, in this case, Hens-Piazza is clearly ignoring the theological perspective

of the author (the Deuteronomist), who claims that all Israel feared the king because he had the wisdom to decide justly. The interpretation seems strained.

As another example, I do not necessarily disagree with all of the comments on 2 Kgs 17, only lament a missed opportunity. Hens-Piazza rightly shows that both the people and the leadership had a misunderstanding of their God, resulting in infidelity, most notably through idolatry. Moreover, she is right in stressing the covenantal relationship that had been broken. Yet her application to today turns to the abuse of religious power in the name of the God of organized religions as well as the evil of imperialistic politics and the exploitation of some economic systems. However, according to the text, the people and leaders were demonstrating how their heart toward God was the same as previous generations. They failed to take heed to the words of the Lord's prophets because of their stiff neck, just like their fathers, "who did not *believe* in Yahweh their God" (17:14). As such, the text turns toward their lack of faith, which finds no mention in the commentary on this section. In my opinion, this is integral to understanding the indictment of this chapter and offers the timeless principle for those who would enter into the covenantal relationship with God.

Another weakness that will disturb the more careful scholar is the lack of interaction with others sources on Kings. At times Hens-Piazza refers to the views or conclusions of "some" in the scholarly word, but even in these cases there is no reference to the work of others. The commentary is written without any footnotes, but at rare times Hens-Piazza refers to a work in parentheses. This is the exception rather than the rule. Moreover, at times the scholarship is somewhat careless. For example, Hens-Piazza refers to two (and only two) resources in the introduction, those of Noth and Cross. However, the sources to which she refers do not appear in the brief bibliography. Although not a big deal given the magnitude of the works by Noth and Cross, it just seems like a rather sloppy oversight.

In my view, despite the weaknesses discussed above, Hens-Piazza has made at least two contributions. First, she consistently applies the literary approach to reading Old Testament narrative. As such, for undergraduate and possibly graduate and seminary students, it is a keen example of such an approach. Hens-Piazza does a good job of retelling the story by clearly identifying the plot, the conflict, and the resolution. Moreover, she makes excellent textual connections of rhetorical techniques such as wordplays, repetition, and the like, and does so with clearly readable language and writing style. Second, Hens-Piazza has written a commentary on Kings that is quite readable and is thus inviting to the pastor and/or student. She does not get bogged down in the minutiae of critical studies or historical debates. Rather, she adeptly retells the story, making the narrative cohere for the biblical student. In conclusion, I commend it to the student and pastor with the simple caveat that one should complement it with other resources on Kings.