

FACTFILE: GCE RELIGIOUS STUDIES

UNIT AS 3: AN INTRODUCTION TO THEMES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT



The Relationship between Kingship and Prophecy

An Introduction to “Royal” History:

The books of 1st and 2nd Kings constitute the great “royal history” of Israel and Judah in the Old Testament. They trace the ups and downs of kingship all the way from the death of David (dated to 962 BCE by some scholars but strongly disputed by others) to the destruction of Jerusalem (587 BCE), with a brief appendix linked to the death of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 562 BCE. The term “royal history” recognizes at the outset that this literature is concerned with “royal” information including the policies, actions, and destinies of these two ancient states. In such an ancient society, dominated by patriarchal-royal assumptions, it is evident that the future of the state and all of its members was connected to and largely determined by the future of its kings.

In the phrase “royal history” attention also has to be given to the term “history.” Note that in a Christian view of the Old Testament 1st and 2nd Kings are regularly taken to be “history.” It may be that they form the most reliable timeline we have for the monarchy in these ancient states and articulate the primary shape of that ancient past through which this ancient community in two states is most commonly understood. Indeed, the timeline of this material has largely been adopted as normative, given the lack of any alternative substantive presentation: there is no better sustained data than is provided in these books.

At the same time, it should also be noted that to term this literature “history” in any modern sense of an accurate “factual” account of that past is widely recognized by scholars to be deeply

problematic: it is a difficult question to determine in any particular instance whether “historical” reports in the text are “factually” reliable. In part, the problem is that the data is confusing and unclear and does not always confirm what we think we know from other, admittedly sparse, sources. Thus, taken as “history,” the detail of this account is not consistently reliable. In the present sceptical mood of scholarship, including the influence of minimalist thought, critical interpreters look quite cautiously at these materials as historically reliable. It is common, though, to assume that the later accounts (perhaps beginning with the report on Hezekiah) are more reliable than the earlier ones. In addition, it is clear that the “historian” does not take much effort to assess the validity of the several sources employed, for the emphasis is primarily on the process of coherently blending all kinds of sources and memories together so that they can function as a normative account of the past.

Furthermore, it is crucial to underline that 1st and 2nd Kings do not intend to be history in any modern sense of the term. Rather, this material is and intends to be an interpretive commentary on that “royal history”: it is what we might call a theology of history, which attempts to understand the vagaries of lived public experience in that world with particular reference to the God of Israel.

In the Jewish order of the books in the Hebrew Bible/ Old Testament, 1st and 2nd Kings are placed among the Former Prophets, along with Joshua, Judges and the books of Samuel. This designation of the books of Kings as prophecy helps us to understand that a key aspect of the literature is an exploration

of the relationship between kingship and prophecy. Sometimes the attitude to kingship is so positive and overawed that the literature appears to be something like royal propaganda; but at other times a much more critical stance is taken. It is this critical perspective that ultimately prevails in final redaction.

Sources and Structure: As already indicated, the books of Kings constitute the fourth component of the Former Prophets, a literature that seeks to reimagine and reinterpret the remembered past of Israel with reference to a God who makes promises and issues commands. The “historian” behind the work utilizes a variety of sources to piece together what has become the metanarrative of ancient Israel in the land. These sources appear to include temple archives, royal archives and folktales, and are of varying degrees of historical reliability: degrees that are so difficult to assess that some scholars in some instances might call them “alleged” sources.

Interestingly, the text offers something like footnotes to send the curious reader to the library to check on what are taken to be reliable, sober historical accounts that precede this theological interpretation. These three “sources” are specified as:

The Book of the Acts of Solomon
(see 1st Kings 11:41)

The Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah
(see 1st Kings 15:7)

The Book of the Annals of the Kings of Israel
(see 1st Kings 16:20)

These works were apparently available in the royal library, though none has survived. In any case, attention should not be on the sources but on the interpretive intention and interpretive imagination by which this “historian” is able to read these texts from a particular theological perspective.

In a surface reading, 1st and 2nd Kings narrate the course of the united kingdom of Solomon after the death of David (1st Kings 1–11), the course of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (1st Kings 12–2nd Kings 17), and the course of the kingdom of Judah in its last years after the destruction of the northern kingdom (2nd Kings 18–25). Thus the literature purports to trace the past of the people of God from the death of David (1st Kings 2:10–11) to the deportation of Judah, ending with a final reference to Jehoiachin, the last Davidic king (2nd Kings 25:27–30).

Theological Themes and Final Redaction:

There have been three major attempts to identify the theological programme and perspective that has interpreted this literature in its finally redacted form, all from a close circle of insightful German scholars:

1. According to the still influential critical hypothesis of Martin Noth, 1st and 2nd Kings are the culmination of the Deuteronomistic History, an understanding of Israel’s life in the land according to the theological assumptions of the traditions of Deuteronomy. In Noth’s proposal, the literature was primarily to provide an explanation for the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, which is interpreted as an act of divine judgment in response to long-term disobedience by Israel to God’s commands: thus, Noth thought the material was exclusively focused on explicating the theme of divine judgment.
2. An alternative was offered by Hans Walter Wolff, who highlighted the theme of repentance. This reading suggests that the literature was not simply a look back from the exile on Israel’s long history of disobedience but was addressed to the community in exile about the way forward out of exile: a return to and fresh embrace of God’s Torah/Law commandments (note that the same theme is found in Ezekiel 18).
3. Building on this, Gerhard von Rad saw that there were two key themes in deep tension with each other embedded within 1st and 2nd Kings. On the one hand, the “history” is dominated by prophetic announcements of judgment that subsequently come to pass; on the other, however, while the history is preoccupied with such oracles of judgment, matters are not that simple. This is so because alongside such oracles of judgment there is also a theme that plays little part in Deuteronomy or the Deuteronomistic outlook: the sustaining grace of God to this people in disobedience so that appropriate divine judgment is remarkably delayed. The basis for divine forbearance and grace is located in the oracle of 2nd Samuel 7.

It should be observed that 1st and 2nd Kings continue the narrative form of 1st and 2nd Samuel, showing some of the same subtle literary skill and artfulness. But 1st and 2nd Kings are more heavily Deuteronomistic in their theology and often more annalistic in their recounting of political events.

Sussing Out Solomon:

In popular imagination, Solomon is often thought of as a great and wise king: this illustrates, in its way, the persuasive power of the “royal propaganda” dimension in the text.

No other king of Israel – not even David himself – ascended a higher pinnacle of worldly splendour than Solomon, and therefore it is eminently understandable that he was celebrated. His vast building programme, fabulous wealth and large harem, his far-flung commercial enterprises, up-to-date military programme, and his patronage of wisdom and the arts were admired by his subjects (or some of them) and by visitors from afar like the Queen of Sheba. In the brief period of fifty to sixty years (if the timeline is to be trusted) Israel had risen from political obscurity to the rank of a small empire that commanded the political attention and economic envy of neighbouring nations. David laid the foundation for this and Solomon built on it primarily through political shrewdness and international diplomacy rather than military engagement. He was assisted by the temporary weakness of the international “super-powers,” Egypt and Assyria. The outstanding figure on the horizon was Hiram, King of Tyre, under whose leadership the Phoenicians established a vast colonial empire throughout the Mediterranean world. David had entered an alliance with Hiram; through military control of the land highways, Solomon continued the policy of co-operation. The stage was set for a period of dazzling material prosperity.

But this is a view of Solomon’s reign seen through rose-tinted glasses, tinged with propaganda. Solomon came to power solely on account of his birth and the influence of his supporters. By removing any possible rivals to the throne “the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon” (1st Kings 2:46). This was the usual route to power in the ancient world, so in this respect Israel had indeed become “like the nations.” Ultimately this situation gave rise to prophetic challenge to royal power on the basis of the Mosaic covenant and the more egalitarian society it supported. Solomon was born within the royal system and never knew anything but the sheltered, extravagant life of a king’s palace. From first to last he ruled with absolute power, caring little about the values and social formations of the older covenantal tradition. The legendary story in 1st Kings 3:3–15 describes him at the outset of his career choosing God’s gift of an understanding heart to judge and therefore rule the people, rather than riches and honour: the reality of his administration shows he lacked the capacity to fulfil this pious dream. Ambitious and selfish by nature, his lavish court in Jerusalem was a hall of mirrors that reflected the glory and reputation of the great king of Israel.

The basis for the transition to Solomon’s governance is described in 1st Kings, chapter 4. It is a summary report on the development, success and extravagance of the Solomonic regime. That regime must have been enormously successful and deeply impressive to Israelites who were only two generations removed from hill-country subsistence living. The chapter is divided into five sections: the first four concern economic development and are complemented in the fifth by an account of one of Solomon’s cultural interests. In the chapter Solomon is evidently changing the foundations of social relationships in Israel decisively, away from egalitarian, communitarian modes towards a much more highly centralized and organized arrangement. For such an ambitious government, two general mechanisms were required: a bureaucracy to administer power; and an adequate tax system to finance the new ambitions. Both needs are dealt with in the changes recounted in the chapter. But note how right in the midst of a passage that describes an oppressive policy of Solomon, it is claimed that, “Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea; they ate and drank and were happy” (1st Kings 4:20–21); perhaps those who benefitted from the changes initiated by Solomon were happy, but the inclusion of all of Judah and Israel seems more like royal propaganda, as does the claim that “Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom” (1st Kings 10:23).

The account of the temple construction (see chapters 5–7) that culminates in its dedication by Solomon in chapter 8 is placed at the centre of the Solomonic material. The temple is a central focus for the “historian” of 1st and 2nd Kings since his account will end in its razing by the Babylonians (2nd Kings 25:13–17). Significantly, the temple was designed by Phoenician and therefore Canaanite architects, and represented the presence of Canaanite culture in the centre of Israel’s life and worship: for Israelites committed to the Mosaic covenantal tradition Solomon’s bold imitation of foreign ways would have been shocking; from their perspective, the temple was essentially a state sanctuary.

The temple was only part of an extensive building programme: seven years were devoted to it, but thirteen were devoted to the construction of the palace complex, consisting of government buildings, the king’s dwelling, the royal chapel, and the house of his Egyptian queen. Outside Jerusalem, Solomon built chariot cities and other fortifications. A large fleet of horse-drawn chariots enabled him to protect his land and to control the trade routes over which wealth poured into his kingdom (1st Kings 4:26; 9:10;

10:26). An excellent example of Solomon's far-flung commercial enterprises was his construction of a fleet of ships at Ezion-geber, in co-operation with Hiram, King of Tyre. This aspect of his growing international influence may have prompted the visit of the Queen of Sheba to negotiate a commercial treaty with the king, who was cutting into her prosperous camel-caravan trade across Arabia. If that was her aim, when she "told him all that was on her mind" the conversation must have come around to economic relations between the two countries. It seems her diplomacy was not in vain, for "King Solomon gave to the Queen of Sheba all that she desired" (1st Kings 10:1–13).

This underlines that Solomon was embedded in a network of international relations. In connection with this, it should be noted that his possession of "seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines" was not exclusively evidence of sensuality: many of his marriages were for the purpose of establishing close political and cultural ties with surrounding nations. Thus, his marriage to Pharaoh's daughter was a diplomatic marriage that linked Israel and Egypt together as allies. Since marriages of this type were primarily motivated by political considerations, Solomon was quite willing for his foreign wives to practice their own religions and went so far as to build them special shrines in his capital city. Thus, note carefully that Solomon's multiple marriages to foreign princesses were part of a larger systematic policy of joining the political-economic apparatus of the globalization of his time; but this inevitable led to the forsaking of the local Israelite tradition of covenantal obedience. In this perspective, it is precisely Solomon's policies of ambition that bring success that in turn bring judgment and disaster.

The whole of the story of Solomon can be understood as being organized around two phrases that are in deep tension with each other:

Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. (1st Kings 3:3)

King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh; Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women. (1st Kings 11:1)

The beginning point in 3:3 features Solomon as a good, responsible, faithful king who accomplishes great things. The narrative concludes in chapter 11 with a harsh judgment on Solomon, explaining how most of the territory of the kingdom was lost at his

death (1st Kings 11:9–13). By the end of the narrative of Solomon, it is clear that the Solomonic account of 1st Kings 1–11 is quite intentionally shaped according to a theological understanding rooted in the standards of Deuteronomy, with its focus on the conditionality of Torah/Law obedience as the way to do well in the world. This perspective is of decisive importance for the larger narrative of the Deuteronomistic Historian. It is also important because a negative conclusion concerning Solomon goes against the grain of the popular notion of Solomon that is largely in awe of his wisdom, power and success. It may be that a way of understanding this material is that a tendency to royal propaganda in lauding Solomon is undercut by the final redaction at the hands of the school of Deuteronomistic History. Given this, it is sometimes difficult to know if irony is intended in the reportage of events. For example, on the face of it 1st Kings 9:10–10:29 present Solomon as prosperous and effective; but in Deuteronomistic perspective we are aware that the regime is not working because Torah/Law is being systematically violated in a royal practice of self-aggrandizement, grounded in theological autonomy and thus in disregard of the ultimate rule of the God of Israel.

Partition of South and North: Finally, following the death of Solomon, the combination of socio-political, socio-economic and socio-religious factors that had been simmering during Solomon's reign came to the boil and precipitated the partition of the united kingdom of Israel and Judah. In 1st Kings 12, Rehoboam, Solomon's son and successor in Jerusalem, made a trip into northern territory to seek the support of the ten northern tribes for his installation as "king of Israel." It is significant that the meeting took place at Shechem, which was hallowed for northerners by unforgettable memories. It was at Shechem, near a sacred tree, that Abraham had built an altar to God (Gen. 12:6). In addition, in the Jacob cycle, which was treasured in northern memory, Jacob's first land in Canaan was at Shechem (Gen. 33:18–20). But above all, Shechem was the place where the covenantal community rooted in Mosaic instruction had been established (Joshua 24). At this ancient tribal gathering place, the northern tribes showed their independence. Smarting under the whiplash that Solomon had laid upon them, they demanded that the yoke be lightened since Solomon's oppressive policy had fallen most heavily upon the prosperous northern tribes. Rehoboam, shunning the advice of his older advisors and swayed by progressive young men, answered the Israelite ultimatum by threatening that whereas his father had lashed them with whips, he would whip them with

scorpions. This was the match that touched off the explosion that led to the division of the kingdom. When Rehoboam crassly sent Adoniram, the official in charge of forced labour, to bring the situation under control, the northerners stoned him to death. Rehoboam fled to Jerusalem and partition ensued.

It should be stressed that Israel's memory is permeated with the experience and fear of forced labour: that is, requirements imposed by a royal apparatus. There is no doubt that the Exodus deliverance was emancipation from forced labour, intensified by relentless pressure to meet state production quotas. Samuel recognized such state practice as a threat to the covenant community (1st Sam. 8:12-17). Already in the time of David there were hints of the practice in Israel (2nd Sam. 20:20). But it is with Solomon, perhaps imitating Egypt, that forced labour becomes crucially important in Israel. While 1st Kings 9:15–22 claims that Israelites were exempt from service, 5:13–18 indicates otherwise: people were certainly inflamed by the issue, either through fear of it happening or experience of it. Either way, Solomon imposed demands that initiated the resistance movement of 1st Kings 12. The memory of emancipation made Israel endlessly vigilant and resistant against such exploitative proposals and practices: by contrast, Solomon seemed unaware of the depth of feeling and its revolutionary consequences.

Concept Deepening—The Role of an Ideal King:

Psalm 72 depicts the various roles of a king in an exaggerated style: he is to bring justice, rain, fertility, prosperity, long life, concern for the poor, the defeat of enemies and the subjugation of other kings. It is thought the psalm was composed for the inauguration of a Davidic king in Jerusalem. In tenor and style, it is appropriate for such an occasion and could be used each time there was an enthronement ceremony. Thus, it is not about a specific king; rather, it is about the office and vocation of kingship. The belief that rulers were the agency through whom the gods dealt with their people was a common feature of the monarchical cultures surrounding Israel. The administration of justice, the conduct of warfare, and the provision of well-being belonged to the office of a king: he was believed capable of these responsibilities because power flowed to the people from a deity through the king.

Psalm 72 is a particularly clear example of Israel's appropriation of this view. Repeatedly the poem connects what God in an intercessory way is requested to do for the king with the acts the king is expected to do for the people. In Israel's

adoption of royal theology, a priority emerges that is characteristic of its understanding of God: justice and righteousness. These qualities became the first and organizing responsibility of a king upon which all else depended. They were not one item on a list but the foundation on which everything else rested: justice for the helpless was the definitive mark of the reign of God and the key priority for the king. The king himself was to be the source of righteousness, well-being, fertility, and victory, the one who saved the helpless when they called, the one served by nations, and the one whose name endured forever. This is an exalted view of kingship, with an undercurrent of propaganda.

In the books of Kings, this type of royal theology is probed and questioned, especially through charismatic prophetic figures like Elijah and Elisha: issues raised include where divine power is manifest, by whom, whether kings exercise a monopoly on power, what happens when they do not adequately fulfil their role, and whether God can be domesticated.

A Mixed Bag of Kings and a Magnificent Few

Prophets: The long middle section of the books of Kings, 1st Kings 12:1–2nd Kings 17:41, provides the story of the twinned kingdoms of Israel and Judah after the death of Solomon, a period commonly dated 962–721 BCE. The latter date refers to the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel and its capital, Samaria, at the hands of the Assyrians. The most important feature of the Deuteronomistic editing is the fairly standard formula whereby each king is identified by his age at the beginning of his reign, the length of his reign, the name of the queen mother, and the formula for the end of a reign. The most important detail in the formula is that a verdict is given on each king: all northern kings are reckoned to be bad because of necessity they violate commitment to the central shrine in Jerusalem; in the southern Davidic line, most kings are bad, six are approved of in a qualified way, and only two—Hezekiah and Josiah—are fully approved. This verdict is rendered in terms of a king's loyalty to God, God's commands and God's temple. Ultimately, irrespective of whether southern kings fare better than their northern counterparts in the Deuteronomistic verdict, it is indicated that both Israel and Judah will fall and be taken into exile.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of this extended middle section in 1st and 2nd Kings is a collection of prophetic narratives extending from 1st Kings 17 to 2nd Kings 9, featuring Elijah and Elisha, plus a narrative about Micaiah ben Imlah.

This collection of narratives bears none of the marks of the Deuteronomistic Historian; but it is important that in the final form of the text the Deuteronomistic editors gave these stories such a prominent and extended place.

The narratives themselves exhibit the dramatic larger-than-life characters looming large in the land, performing spectacular wonders and in general holding the initiative for this telling of the story: an initiative, note, which otherwise and characteristically belongs to kings. It is conventional to regard these stories as folk legends, that is, as rooted in some unrecoverable event which has been greatly exaggerated through constant retelling in imaginative ways. Such a way of understanding this material is acceptable, as long as the conclusion is not drawn from this labelling and assessment that the narratives are fancifully insubstantial and therefore are not to be taken seriously. They occur in such a prominent and extensive place in the book of Kings (occupying nearly a third of the whole), that they must be taken with great seriousness as serving the intention of the final interpreters. At the deepest level, the narratives seem to indicate an epistemological crisis in Israel and dramatically depict an epistemological alternative to royal theology and the powerful role of the king in it. Thus, these narratives evidence a way of knowing and living and experiencing reality, plus a way of witnessing to reality, that lies outside the scope and rationality of royal control. In effect, there were those in ancient Israel who either never accepted the theology of Psalm 72 or came to doubt its efficacy when a discreditable king was in power.

So, that these stories are legends of the people of the land—folk tales of ordinary folk—means that there was an important and continuing population that did not subscribe to the interpretation of reality promulgated by the royal establishment and other urban elites: these peasants were able to interpret and manage their lives differently. The work of James C. Scott on the way peasant communities in the contemporary world develop, transmit and depend on “hidden transcripts” to survive the dominant transcript of the landowning class may help better understand these narratives. Scott suggests that such communities develop narrative strategies for rereading historical reality differently, thereby maintaining nerve and the chance to survive. Scott’s analysis may cast light in a pertinent way on the origin, survival and intention of these prophetic narratives. It is intriguing that the Deuteronomistic Historian preserved these

narratives and indeed gave them such prominence in his account of royal history, surely as a strategic way to subvert the pretentious claims of monarchy.

These stories, therefore, attest to a social life that has not been brought under royal control. By being told and retold and heard yet again, they effectively constitute acts of civil disobedience that affirm that much of life—and the power for life—lie beyond royal control in a world where God’s rule is much more immediate than royal rationality can allow: God’s power does not need to be mediated through the king.

Against this background, several points can be made about Elijah in relation to the stories told about him:

1. Elijah is presented as the quintessential Mosaic prophet. He is clearly linked to and patterned after Moses, and this is why he is so appealing to a Deuteronomistic perspective. It can be said that in Elijah, the Mosaic tradition came alive with new power.
2. Elijah is invested with remarkable powers to enact transformative miracles: he is presented as a man of power for life, through whom the life sustaining presence of God is made manifest (see 1st Kings 17). This chapter represents an abrupt and decisive interruption of the royal narrative; a pause to begin to consider the prophetic counterforce in Israel’s life. In Elijah we encounter the raw, unfiltered power of God that lies completely beyond the command of royal houses as he cares for an alien widow (1st Kings 17:8–16) and demonstrates his power for life against death (1st Kings 17:17–24): authentic divine authority and real energy for concern and amazing transformation lie outside the claims of monarchy.
3. Elijah is presented as the great champion of God and of religious Yahwism in its life-or-death struggle with Baalism (see 1st Kings 18). The contest at Mount Carmel is a defining moment in the religious history of Israel when Baalism, supported by the dynasty of Omri, was regarded as the sharp antithesis of Yahwism and as a primal threat to God’s rule. Elijah, in prophetic fierceness, is portrayed as God’s fearless champion who establishes the singular claim of God against entrenched religious, political power. It is significant that following the contest, Elijah is capable of producing rain: that which the king should have guaranteed according to Psalm 72 comes instead from a marginalized

prophet; God's power is not "managed" by the royal system and thus the subversive claim of the story against Ahab asserts that a king who cannot cause rain does not have the power that properly belongs to the office.

4. The fierce and deeply religious contrast between God and Baal is matched in the narratives by an equally intense conflict between competing economic theories of land and property, which are linked to religious claims. In 1st Kings 21, Elijah, on behalf of Naboth, is spokesperson for an old tribal theory of inheritance that precludes the royal notion of land as a tradable commodity. In this understanding, the land was not Naboth's private property to dispose of as he pleased: it belonged to the whole family or clan through whom it had been passed down from generation as a sacred inheritance. By connecting the religious contest of 1st Kings 18 to the economic conflict of chapter 21, the text makes clear that religious loyalty and economic-political practices are closely intertwined with each other. The outcome of the Naboth confrontation is that Elijah pronounces a massive prophetic threat against the dynasty of Ahab (1st Kings 21:20–24) that awaited fulfilment until 2nd Kings 9:30–37. The connection between oracle and narrative fulfilment underlines that the prophetic word of Elijah is indeed powerful and effective in the historical process.
5. Elijah is part of a prophetic movement and passes his mantle on to Elisha (1st Kings 19:19–21). In the narrative telling of the transition, Elijah is bodily taken up into heaven in the presence of eyewitnesses. That he "ascended" attests that he did not die but continues to live: the only other such case in the Old Testament concerns Enoch, of whom the text tersely reports, "God took him" (Gen. 5:24); this report generated much thought within Jewish mysticism and resulted in an extended speculative literature about Enoch. Similarly, the claim that Elijah had ascended and still lived generated the idea that he could reappear with power in Israel's future (this theme is evident in the New Testament, including when John the Baptizer is presented as Elijah *redivivus*).

The narrative of 2nd Kings understands Elisha, disciple of Elijah, as a carrier of the same inscrutable power that Elijah exhibited. The stories he appears in reflect this continuity and further ponder the activity of God in the world. In 2nd Kings 4, Elisha goes about his awesome work (begun in chapter 3), only this time engaged

in pastoral activity toward needy people, all accomplished without reference to the king. The narrative consists of five "wonders" that invite astonishment (vv.1–7, 8–17, 18–37, 38–41, and 42–44). Of these, the second and third episodes are interconnected and deal with the same person, the woman from Shunem. The wonders are designed to evoke amazement at Elisha's capacity to invert circumstances.

This theme is reiterated in 2nd Kings 5 in the arena of international politics. Here, Elisha deals with Naaman, a top-ranking Syrian general, not only an outsider to Israel but a prominent agent of Israel's perennial enemy. The chapter divides into two distinct parts: the complex account of the healing of the general (vv.1–19a); and the follow-up narrative of Gehazi, who tries to exploit Naaman (vv.19b–27). The two episodes are inter-related: (a) the afflicted one is healed; (b) the exploitative one is afflicted. In the end, the two characters exchange positions.

Then, in 2nd Kings 6:8–23 the deep-seated hostility between Israel and Syria (Aram) forms the context for a story about enemies sharing a meal together. The narrative identifies neither the "king of Aram" nor the "king of Israel": clearly, Elisha and neither king is the key character. The narrative may be divided into three parts: the pursuit of the "spy" (vv.8–14); the decisive and peculiar action of Elisha (vv.15–19); and the beneficial consequence of prophetic activity (vv.20–23).

The entire cycle of prophetic narratives that focus on the activity of Elijah and Elisha is situated in the midst of the northern dynasty of Omri, and depicts a mode of public life that neither defers to nor depends on royal governance. It is therefore plausible to suggest that taken together these narratives function to delegitimize royal power—at least in the northern kingdom—and to assert that God as the giver of life has other agents and avenues, outside monarchy, whereby to give life in a range of difficult circumstances. The narratives are thus inherently subversive of royal power, and intended to be so in the final form of the text.

The Books of Kings and Other Aspects of Human Experience: Although very different to and distant from the modern world in many regards, 1st and 2nd Kings resonate with it in a range of ways. The following may be considered:

- Different religions claim particular insight to divine will (as did Yahwism and Baalism, as do all the major world religions) but the tensions within

- one religious tradition (as in the confrontation between Elijah and the king, representing the Mosaic and Davidic traditions respectively) can be every bit as acute, sometimes leading to sectarianism (in Islam and Christianity, for example).
- The role of the king in ancient Israel can be used as a way of exploring the very contemporary issue of the role of the state in ensuring the welfare of all; this may be related to prophetic movements within societies, especially on behalf of those at the margins of society (the type of people Elijah and Elisha engaged with).
 - Various religious experiences can be reflected on through the activity of Elijah and Elisha, including the importance and role of aspects like established religion, folk religion, charismatic religion—the contrast between religious forms mediated through clerics and more immediate religious manifestations in, for example, the Pentecostal tradition.
 - The broad, interesting and deep question of where God's power is seen in the modern world and how this relates to politics.

