

THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF KINGS IN RELATION TO DEUTERONOMY AND JEREMIAH

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WHY WAS THE BOOK OF KINGS WRITTEN and what was its message? Various opinions concerning this issue have been suggested by scholars.¹ It is clear that this book presents a confession of sin and a justification of divine judgment. It is also clear that the author was intensely interested in the fulfillment of the word of God in history. However, one should ask whether the author of Kings presented the destruction of Jerusalem as a final end or as a new beginning? Did he view the relationship between God and Israel as an everlasting bond or did he re-

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¹ The main issues presented in this article were discussed during a seminar held in honor of Moshe Weinfeld at the University of Haifa on June 12, 1999. The lecture is published here with minor changes. The following are some of the many works released in the last decade on this subject: Lewis Vale Alexander, "The Origin and Development of the Deuteronomistic History Theory and Its Significance for Biblical Interpretation" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX, 1993); A. Graeme Auld, *Kings without Privilege: David and Moses in the Story of the Bible's Kings* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1994); Erik Eynikel, *The Reform of King Josiah and the Composition of the Deuteronomistic History* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Gray N. Knoppers, *Two Nations under God: The Deuteronomistic History of Solomon and the Dual Monarchies*, 2 vols. (Atlanta: Scholars, 1993); Steven L. McKenzie, *The Trouble with Kings: The Composition of the Book of Kings in the Deuteronomistic History*, *Vetus Testamentum Supplement* 42 (Leiden: Brill, 1991); Steven L. McKenzie and M. Patrick Graham, eds., *The History of Israel's Traditions: The Heritage of Martin Noth*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement* 182 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994); James Richard Linville, *Israel in the Book of Kings: The Past as a Project of Social Identity*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement* 272 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1998); Linda S. Schearing and S. L. McKenzie, eds., *Those Elusive Deuteronomists: The Phenomenon of Pan-Deuteronomism*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement* 268 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1999); and Ernst Würthwein, *Studien zum deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerk* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994).

gard the catastrophe as the last station on a long, painful, and disappointing path?

If the author of 1 and 2 Kings focused only on the past, expressing no hope for the future, as Noth and other scholars suggest,² the message of this book is negative. The readers would then comprehend the futility of obeying God's orders, since their fate had been already determined by their ancestors and therefore could not be changed. Indeed such a view was prevalent among the exiles: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezek. 18:2).³

Did the author of the Book of Kings in fact compose this text of such broad scope only to tell his readers that their relationship with God had ceased? Is Kings nothing but a gloomy and pessimistic accusation that contains no hope, consolation, or clemency?

The fall of the kingdom of Judah and the destruction of the Lord's city and temple had created a profound crisis in Judah. The elite of Jerusalem and Judah suffered great economic and social losses and were driven from their land, deposed from their positions, and cast into a foreign land. Yet the greatest loss of all was their disillusionment, the loss of the belief in the immunity of Jerusalem, and in the idea that God would never harm His city or abandon His land (Jer. 7:14). The relationship between God and Israel suffered from a severe and unprecedented crisis: The prophets' warnings were fulfilled and the people of Judah were exiled.

One of the main questions the exiles asked was whether the breach between God and His people was final, or if there was still hope, with the Exile being simply a passing phase in their complex relationship. Some exiles felt despair and hopelessness and sensed that they had reached a dead end. Others, however, believed that God would again pardon His people and return them to their land. They viewed the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile as a temporary nadir that could be healed. Since God had previously chosen to place mercy before justice, why should He not do so again?

The Bible contains clear data regarding these two views. The feeling of despair seems to have enveloped the majority. The exiles

² "Clearly he saw the divine judgment which was acted out in his account of the external collapse of Israel as a nation as something final and definitive and he expressed no hope for the future, not even in the very modest and simple form of an expectation that the deported and dispersed people would be gathered together" (Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, trans. J. Doull et al., *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement* 15 [Sheffield: JSOT, 1981], 97).

³ Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

knew that the thousands of Israelites and Judeans who had been exiled at the end of the eighth century by the Assyrian kings (in 733–732, 720, and 701 B.C.) had never returned to their homeland, and many actually remained in exile for more than 150 years. Moreover, their land was settled by foreigners. Had God forsaken them forever? Would they ever recover? Many exiles said to Ezekiel, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost: we are cut off completely” (Ezek. 37:11). On the other hand the prophets, emphasizing the need for repentance, inspired the exiles with the hope of returning to their motherland (e.g., Jer. 29:4–14).

The message of the Book of Kings is clear: The author did not present the history of the relationship between Israel and God as a process leading toward destruction and loss, but rather as an intricate and complex relationship that has its ups and downs, with sin, repentance, and forgiveness. The message is one of hope and consolation: The Lord forgave His elected people in the past and He would forgive them in the future. The Exile did not mean the end of relations between God and His people. Hope was not lost. Therefore those who were exiled needed to regain their belief in God and pray to Him, and He would rescue them and return them to their land.⁴

The importance of warning and repentance is emphasized in many passages in Kings. The following three examples will suffice.

One example is 1 Kings 13:1–10, 33–34. The hand of Jeroboam was paralyzed as punishment for his sins. He asked a man of God to pray that his paralysis would be cured. Indeed the man prayed and God forgave Jeroboam, and his paralysis was healed.

A second example is 1 Kings 21:27–29. Ahab, king of Israel, who enraged the God of Israel by worshiping Baal, repented after receiving a harsh verdict against him and his house. Because of his repentance, the sentencing of his dynasty was delayed: “Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son’s days I will bring the disaster on his house.”

A third example is 2 Kings 13:1–5, 22–24. Jehoahaz, son of

⁴ For emphasis on the positive and optimistic message in the Book of Kings see Gerhard von Rad, “Das deuteronomistische Geschichtstheologie in den Königsbücher,” *Deuteronomium Studien*, B (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1947), 52–64; Hans Walter Wolff, “Das Kerygma des deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerk,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 73 (1961): 171–86; Eep Talstra, *Solomon’s Prayer: Synchrony and Diachrony in the Composition of 1 Kings 8:14–61* (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1993); and Alexander, “The Origin and Development of the Deuteronomistic History Theory,” 237–40.

Jehu, sinned in the eyes of God and was punished severely by the kings of Aram. Yet, following his plea to God, “the LORD was gracious to them and had compassion on them; he turned toward them” (v. 23).

Seemingly it is not coincidental that repentance is expressed in the book through wicked kings and their sins: through Jeroboam and, specifically, through Ahab, who “did more to provoke the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, worse than had all the kings of Israel who were before him” (1 Kings 16:33).

Recompense in the Book of Kings is collective and accumulative. However, it is also conditional and delayed. God visits the sins of the fathers on their children only if they are His enemies. A villain would bear the sins of his wicked fathers, but not a righteous son, and righteousness delays the verdict. The last king of Israel indeed sinned less than his predecessors, yet he sinned; Judah fell during the time of Zedekiah as a result of Manasseh’s sins, yet Zedekiah was not “righteous.”

On the other hand God said that Jehu had “done well in carrying out what I consider right, and in accordance with all that was in my heart” (2 Kings 10:30). As a result, four of his descendants would sit on his throne. Similarly Josiah—before whom there was no king who “turned to the LORD with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might” (23:25)—succeeded in delaying the destruction of Jerusalem, and much like Jehu, he was fortunate to have four successors who reigned over Judah.

Solomon’s prayer is essential to comprehend the message of the book. The author of the Book of Kings intended for the words of Solomon to be heard at a key point in the relationship between God and His people, that is, at the time the temple in Jerusalem was dedicated. The following words of Solomon’s prayer would appeal to the exiles and would be a specific plea for repentance because of the hope of returning to the motherland. This is the essence of this book’s message. “Yet if they come to their senses in the land to which they have been taken captive, and repent, and plead with you in the land of their captors, saying, ‘We have sinned, and have done wrong; we have acted wickedly’; if they repent with all their heart and soul, in the land of their enemies, who took them captive, and pray to you toward their land, which you gave to their ancestors, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I have built for your name” (1 Kings 8:47–48). Solomon then noted how the exiles could expect God to answer: “Then hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, maintain their cause and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgression that they have committed against you; and grant them

compassion in the sight of their captors, so that they may have compassion on them” (vv. 49–50).

The people’s cumulative sins would result in the loss of their land. However, even if the Israelites were defeated, their land ruined, and they were exiled, God would still reveal Himself to them, accept their prayers, and return them to the land of their ancestors. “Then hear in heaven, forgive the sin of your people Israel, and bring them again to the land that you gave to their ancestors” (v. 34).

The author of Kings viewed the relationship between God and Israel as an everlasting bond. Even though the Israelites continually betrayed Him and distanced themselves from Him—“They went after false idols and became false” (2 Kings 17:15)—God would remain attentive and forgiving. The destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon signified an additional low point in the people’s relationship with God, and not a final end. Indeed it is one of the lowest points in the history of God’s people. Yet such a crisis was not without precedent. Other crises occurred at the end of Solomon’s days, during the days of the house of Omri, in the time of Ahaz, and during the reign of Manasseh.

Now that God had exhausted His fury and delivered rigorous justice on them, exiles might expect His mercy.

THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF KINGS AND THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

The outlook of the author of Kings is similar to those found in other books, such as Deuteronomy and Jeremiah. Deuteronomy 4:6–30 stresses the importance of repentance in exile. The words in verses 27–29, 31 would raise the exiles’ spirits and inspire them with the hope of returning to the Promised Land.⁵

“The LORD will scatter you among the peoples; only a few of you will be left among the nations where the LORD will lead you. There you will serve other gods made by human hands. . . . From there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find him. . . . Because the LORD your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them” (vv. 27–31). See also 30:1–3, 5: “If you call them [the blessings and the curses] to mind among

⁵ Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 48–50, 215–21.

all the nations, where the LORD your God has driven you, and return to the LORD your God, and you and your children obey him . . . then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the people among whom the LORD your God has scattered you. . . . The LORD your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed."⁶

The message is clear: The destruction and Exile did not signify a conclusion, nor did they end the relationship between the people and God. There was still hope and a way out. Moreover, Moses, who predicted the Exile, also predicted future redemption.

THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH AND THE DEUTERONOMISTIC HISTORY

Scholars long ago recognized "Deuteronomistic" strata in the Book of Jeremiah.⁷ These strata were written in accord with concerns stated in the Book of Deuteronomy or in a style that reflected that of Deuteronomy. The explanation of the destruction in both books is similar, and the books include speeches that are similar. Most important is the fact that within the speeches found in Jeremiah lies the expressed hope to return to the homeland (Jer. 29:12-14; 33:7-11). This fact strengthens the assumption that the Deuteronomistic author of the Book of Kings directed his words to the future, expressing a positive message to his readers.

I agree with Martin Noth that the "Deuteronomistic history" was edited by one person. Yet I disagree with him on many issues, including the date and the extent of the pre-Deuteronomistic and post-Deuteronomistic elements.

In my opinion the Book of Jeremiah is an integral part of the Deuteronomistic history. Jeremiah has more Deuteronomistic elements than other books suggested by Noth, for example, 1 and 2

⁶ For a different interpretation of Deuteronomy 30 1-10 see Marc Zvi Brettler, "Predestination in Deuteronomy 30 1-10," in *Those Elusive Deuteronomists*, 171-88

⁷ Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jeremia* (Tubingen Mohr, 1901), xxff, W Rudolph, *Jeremia* (Tubingen Mohr, 1947), James Philip Hyatt, "The Book of Jeremiah," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed George W Buttrick (New York Abingdon, 1956), 5 775ff, idem, "The Deuteronomic Edition of Jeremiah," in Leo G Perdue and Brian W Kovacs, eds, *A Prophet to the Nations Essays in Jeremiah Studies* (Winona Lake, IN Eisenbrauns, 1984), 247-67, Winfried Theil, *Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia 1-25* (Neukirchen Vluyn Neukirchener, 1973), idem, *Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia 26-45* (Neukirchen Vluyn Neukirchener, 1981), William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah I-XXV*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh Clark, 1986), lxi-lxxxiii, and T C Roemer, "How Did Jeremiah Become a Convert to Deuteronomistic Ideology?" in *Those Elusive Deuteronomists*, 189-99

Samuel.⁸ It is clear that the Book of Jeremiah was “Deuteronomistically” composed.⁹

There are slight variations between the Deuteronomistic editing in Joshua–Kings on the one hand and in Jeremiah on the other. Differences are found mainly in two idiomatic expressions.¹⁰ This distinction might derive from Jeremiah’s vocabulary and there is no need to distinguish between these editorial strata because of these slight changes in style.¹¹ On the contrary the distinct resemblances in content and form demonstrate that the Deuteronomistic work in Joshua–Kings and Jeremiah may have been that of a single person, who prepared an extensive composition describing the history of Israel from Joshua to Jeremiah.

Deuteronomy serves as an introduction to the Deuteronomistic history, whereas the Book of Jeremiah concludes it. In Deuteronomy the path was delineated and norms were determined. The main body of Joshua–Kings records the many ups and downs in Israel’s relationship with God. And the epilogue (the Book of Jeremiah) focuses on the destruction and Exile in an attempt to explain the events and inform the exiles of the message of redemption.

⁸ See Walter Dietrich, “Martin Noth and the Future of the Deuteronomistic History,” in *The History of Israel’s Traditions: The Heritage of Martin Noth*, 170; cf. Ronald Ernest Clements, “Jeremiah 1–25 and the Deuteronomistic History,” in *Understanding Poets and Prophets: Essays in Honour of George Wishart Anderson*, ed. A. Graeme Auld, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement* 152 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 93–113.

⁹ See Richard Elliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Summit, 1987), 146–47; and Norbert Lohfink, “Gab es eine deuteronomistische Bewegung?” in *Jeremia und die “deuteronomistische Bewegung,”* ed. Walter Gross (Weinheim: Beltz Athenäum, 1995), 359.

¹⁰ The Deuteronomist spoke of “burning incense to foreign gods” whereas the Book of Jeremiah refers to “pouring libations to foreign gods” (Jer. 7:18; 19:13; 32:29; 44:17). And the Deuteronomist wrote of the king “sitting upon the throne of Israel” (1 Kings 2:4; 8:25; 9:5), whereas the Book of Jeremiah refers to the king “sitting upon the throne of David” (Jer. 13:13; 17:25; 22:2, 4) (Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1972], 6, 355).

¹¹ Some scholars suggest that one should distinguish between the Deuteronomists of the Deuteronomistic history, who were “traditionalists” and “hardliners,” and the Deuteronomists of Jeremiah, who were more open-minded. See R. Albertz, “Die Intentionen und Träger des deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerks,” in *Schöpfung und Befreiung: Für Claus Westermann zum 80 Geburtstag*, ed. Rainer Albertz et al. (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1989), 37–53; idem, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period, II, From the Exile to the Maccabees*, trans. J. Bowden (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 382–99; and Hermann-Josef Stipp, “Probleme des redaktionsgeschichtlichen Modells der Entstehung des Jeremiabuches,” in *Jeremia und die “deuteronomistische Bewegung,”* 225–62.

In the Hebrew Bible Jeremiah follows Isaiah. However, in an ancient tradition these books were arranged differently. The Book of Jeremiah follows the Book of Kings, and the Book of Isaiah comes after Jeremiah (Babylonian Talmud *Baba Batra* 14b).

The view that the Book of Jeremiah was an integral part of the Deuteronomistic history may explain why Josiah's reform is not mentioned in the Book of Jeremiah,¹² and it may also explain why Jeremiah's name is not mentioned, even once, in the Book of Kings. Furthermore this helps explain why only one chapter is given in the Book of Kings to the last ten years of Judah's kingdom and to the most traumatic event of the book (2 Kings 25). Moreover, this chapter provides no explanation for the destruction. However, there are several verses in the book that deal with this issue (17:19–21; 21:10–16; 22:16–17; 23:26–27; 24:3–4). Yet at the end of the book, following the gruesome depiction of the burning of Jerusalem and the house of God, no explanation is given for the catastrophe. If the Book of Jeremiah is included as part of the Deuteronomistic history, this shows that the reason the last years of the kingdom of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem are recorded so briefly in Kings is that these are discussed more thoroughly in the Book of Jeremiah.

The similarity between Jeremiah 52, which concludes that book, and 2 Kings 25, which ends the Book of Kings, was intended to tighten the bond between Jeremiah and previous parts of the Deuteronomistic history. Jehoiachin's release from captivity (Jer. 52:31–34) is also recorded in 2 Kings 25:27–30, where it seems out of context. Therefore some scholars view this as a later addition to Kings. However, it is appropriate at the end of both books; the exiles would have regarded it as an opening for hope and the realization of Jeremiah's prophecies, much like the chronicler who viewed the return to the Promised Land as a realization of "the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah" (2 Chron. 36:22).

The absence of an explanation for the destruction of Jerusalem in the end of the Book of Kings need not be questioned further, for it is provided extensively in many chapters in Jeremiah (e.g., Jer. 2:4–4:2), which may be viewed as a direct continuation of 2 Kings 25:30. Several Deuteronomistic clichés appear in these chapters, mainly in Jeremiah 2:4–8. Especially noteworthy is the parallel between Jeremiah 2:5 and 2 Kings 17:15: "They went after false idols and became false." It is therefore possible that the author of

¹² See Joseph Schreiner, "Jeremia und die joschyanische Reform Problem-Fragen-Antworten," in *Jeremia und die "deuteronomistische Bewegung,"* 11–31

the Deuteronomistic history composed a complex literary unit (Jer. 2:4–4:2), which on the one hand justified the divine judgment (chap. 2), and yet on the other (chap. 3), expressed hope for the future.¹³

In the Book of Jeremiah the author of the Deuteronomistic history distinctly clarified the message of his extensive work—that a merciful God has made an everlasting bond between Him and His people. “I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. . . . there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride . . . for I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the LORD” (33:7–8, 10–11).

¹³ For recent discussions on Jeremiah 2:1–4:2 see the articles by Nancy C. Lee, A. R. Pete Diamond, Kathleen M. O'Connor, and Marvin A. Sweeney, in *Troubling Jeremiah*, ed. A. R. Pete Diamond, Kathleen M. O'Connor, and Louis Stulma, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement* 260 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1999), 87–122, 123–45, 200–218.



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