

March 16, 2014

The Eve of the Feast of Saint Patrick

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Book of Kings

The division between the two Books of Kings comes from the Greek translation known as the Septuagint. When this translation was made in the third century before Christ, a purely physical consideration obliged the copyists to break Kings into two parts. Whereas the Hebrew language has no formal vowels, Greek does. This meant that the Book of Kings was physically longer in Greek than in Hebrew and had to be inscribed on two scrolls. This is how we came to have First and Second Kings.

Even when Christians replaced the scroll with the codex form, the same division of the work prevailed among scribes of the Septuagint. The Jewish copyists of the Massoretic Text, however, ignored it. Both Josephus and the Talmud speak of Kings as a single book. Not until the invention of the printing press was the Hebrew text of Kings divided, a feature first appearing in the Venice edition of 1517.

This division into two books, however, is artificial and has nothing to do with the real structure of Kings. This is, in fact, a single and unique literary work, with its own recognizable structure, and it should be read, treated, and understood as an integral narrative.

The content of Kings covers the period of the First Temple, from the beginning of Solomon's reign in 961 to the fall of Jerusalem in 586. In fact, the book is chiefly concerned with asking the cause of the latter tragedy. It poses the question: How did it come about that a history begun with so much promise—on the basis of so sound a covenant with God—ended in ruin and despair? This underlying question explains pretty much everything contained in Kings.

It also explains why the Talmud ascribes the composition of Kings to the Prophet Jeremiah (cf. "Bava Batra 14b-15a). Jeremiah was on the scene during the final tragedy and displayed, in his own book, a profound appreciation of its significance.

For all that, it is not clear that Jeremiah had the makings or resources of a historiographer. It seems more likely that Kings comes from professional chroniclers exiled to Babylon with King Jehoiachin in 598, a decade before the destruction of the Temple (cf. 2 Kings 24:12). These were the men who had at their disposal sufficient resources to compose the book sometime during the Babylonian Captivity. There is no reason to date Kings to a period later than 539.

The Book of Kings appears to be structured on an easily discerned outline: Part 1: the reign of Solomon over the united kingdom (961-922), covering I Kings 1—11; Part II: the divided kingdoms (922-722), covering I Kings 12—II Kings 15; Part III: the solitary kingdom of Judah (722-587), covering II Kings 18—25.

Twin refrains form the spine of this book: The kings of Judah are individually assessed by whether or not they followed the example of David, while the kings of Israel are all condemned because they followed the example of Jeroboam I. Each in his own way, both men are the exemplars!

Never, however, during the two centuries shared by both kingdoms, is either realm allowed to disappear from the reader's attention. The year of each king's ascent is determined by his relationship to his counterpart in the other kingdom, and this set format of synchronization keeps us abreast of both kingdoms at all times. Both of them, on spite of their political (and even theological) separation, still pertain to the People of God. Both kingdoms were responsible, too, for the great loss of what had seemed, during Solomon's time, so promising. Israel and Judah were finally joined in a common tragedy.

The narrative in Kings follows several determined patterns; we are invariably given: the year of each king's ascent, the length of his reign, a qualitative assessment of it, significant events associated with each king, and a reference to every king's death, burial, and successor. In addition, the mothers of the kings of Judah are usually named, perhaps simply because they were preserved in the archival material available to the author.

The book's recourse to set formulas should preserve us from a too-literal interpretation of certain passages. For instance, it is hard to think that Zimri, whose reign lasted only one week, really did manage, in so short a time, to accomplish all the accumulated evil done by Jeroboam over the span of twenty-two years (1 Kings 16:19). Zimri would be much worse than Jeroboam!

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