

1 & 2 Kings, by Walter Brueggemann

reviewed by [Thomas W. Walker](#) in the [June 20, 2001](#) issue

Ancient times sound much like modern times--power plays, the strange mix of sex and politics, the intricate dance between nations. Because the stories it tells are echoed by our contemporary ones, Israel's royal history is often mined by those interested in the interweavings of politics, economics and social realities. But Walter Brueggemann suggests that something is missing when we study these texts only as history.

Brueggemann, who is professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, and one of the most prolific and attentive modern readers of the biblical text, notes that the Book of Kings offers a theological exploration that centers on the interplay of the God of history with the political, social and economic realities of the day. "All of this means that the reader of these books must not expect too much 'royal history.' . . . The clue to the whole is that Yahweh is the definitive actor in the public life of Israel: therefore all claims for Realpolitik are in fact provisional and penultimate," he states.

Brueggemann never strays far from this focusing assumption. Throughout his exploration, these texts constantly confront the reader with the demanding claims of obedience to a God who will not be divorced from the historical process. In line with most critical studies, Brueggemann sees the strong dependence of Kings on Torah as it is understood in the Book of Deuteronomy.

Out of this grounding in Deuteronomy comes the demand for sole allegiance to Yahweh. It's a theme highlighted in the stories of Elijah and Elisha, where prophets challenge royal abuse of power. Brueggemann has an obvious affection and affinity for prophetic voices that counter royal assumptions about self-reliant and self-sufficient power with imaginative proposals about Yahweh's ultimate governance of the world.

This affinity is evident in Brueggemann's provocative interweaving of comments on the modern world with the ancient stories that refuse to bracket God's call for obedience from political and economic processes. Facilitating the linkage between

the ancient and modern is the structure of the commentary itself, which moves between analysis of the biblical text and consideration of its relation to modernity. Modern conceptions of power, current historical situations and recent political, psychological and economic theories are brought into conversation with the insights gained from the biblical narrative and are found wanting.

Always prophetic and at times downright unsettling, Brueggemann challenges some of our most cherished assumptions about American prosperity and power-- assumptions he likens to those of the Judean kings who constantly found their claims of authority and superiority subsumed into Yahweh's activity in history.

Brueggemann's attentive reading of both the text and the modern situation distinguishes *his* commentary. He reminds readers that these are his readings and admits that he might have overread at times. Readers may be ill at ease or disagree with his conclusions. Yet that discomfort may be what the biblical text intends, as it invites us to rethink and reimagine the world in terms of a God who does not abandon it and whose radical claims for obedience have concrete implications for the totality of life.

To facilitate further study, the commentary features numerous sidebars and contains an intriguing collection of art, maps and photographs. A CD-Rom version of the text is included with the book.