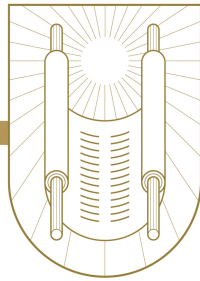


((PREACHING *the* WORD))

1 KINGS

POWER, POLITICS,
and the HOPE *of the* WORLD



JOHN WOODHOUSE

R. Kent Hughes

Series Editor

“It is a pleasure to commend this series of homiletical commentaries. They fill an enormous vacuum that exists between the practical needs of the pastor/teacher and the critical exegetical depth of most commentaries. With this series, evangelicalism may now claim its own William Barclay. While remaining true to the text and its original meaning, Dr. Hughes helps us face the personal, ethical, theological, and practical questions that the text wants us to answer in the presence of the living God and his illuminating Holy Spirit.”

Walter C. Kaiser Jr., President Emeritus and Colman M. Mockler Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Old Testament, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“The single best resource for faithful biblical exposition available today. A great boon for genuine reformation!”

Timothy George, Founding Dean, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University; General Editor, Reformation Commentary on Scripture

“Throughout the Christian centuries, from Chrysostom and Augustine through Luther, Calvin, and Matthew Henry, to Martyn Lloyd-Jones and Ray Stedman, working pastors have been proving themselves to be the best of all Bible expositors. Kent Hughes stands in this great tradition, and his exciting expositions uphold it worthily.”

J. I. Packer, Board of Governors’ Professor of Theology, Regent College

“For this outstanding series of expository commentaries, Kent Hughes has assembled a team of unusually gifted scholar-preachers. The series will be widely used and much sought after.”

Eric J. Alexander, Retired Senior Minister, St. George’s-Tron Parish Church, Glasgow, Scotland

“There is a long history of informed, edifying biblical expositions that have been mightily used of God to shape and strengthen the church. These volumes admirably fit this tradition.”

D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; Cofounder, The Gospel Coalition

“The Preaching the Word commentary series is one of my favorites. The focus upon explaining a text while preaching it as the goal makes the series resonate with the priorities of the pulpit. No academic aloofness here, but down-to-earth, preacher-to-preacher meat for God’s people.”

Bryan Chapell, Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, Illinois

“I’m delighted to endorse the philosophy behind this series. Here sounds out the voice not of the scholar in the study but of the scholar in the pulpit. The authors are all able teachers who regularly expound God’s living Word to his people. May this rich material give us ‘patterns of preaching’ that will not only feed the flock, but, by God’s grace, change the church.”

R. C. Lucas, Retired Rector, St. Helen’s Church, Bishopsgate, London, England

1 KINGS

PREACHING THE WORD

Edited by R. Kent Hughes

Genesis | R. Kent Hughes

Exodus | Philip Graham Ryken

Leviticus | Kenneth A. Mathews

Numbers | Iain M. Duguid

Deuteronomy | Ajith Fernando

Joshua | David Jackman

Judges and Ruth | Barry G. Webb

1 Samuel | John Woodhouse

2 Samuel | John Woodhouse

1 Kings | John Woodhouse

Job | Christopher Ash

Psalms, vol. 1 | James Johnston

Proverbs | Raymond C. Ortlund Jr.

Ecclesiastes | Philip Graham Ryken

Song of Solomon | Douglas Sean O'Donnell

Isaiah | Raymond C. Ortlund Jr.

Jeremiah and Lamentations | R. Kent Hughes

Daniel | Rodney D. Stortz

Matthew | Douglas Sean O'Donnell

Mark | R. Kent Hughes

Luke | R. Kent Hughes

John | R. Kent Hughes

Acts | R. Kent Hughes

Romans | R. Kent Hughes

1 Corinthians | Stephen T. Um

2 Corinthians | R. Kent Hughes

Galatians | Todd Wilson

Ephesians | R. Kent Hughes

Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon | R. Kent Hughes

1–2 Thessalonians | James H. Grant Jr.

1–2 Timothy and Titus | R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell

Hebrews | R. Kent Hughes

James | R. Kent Hughes

1–2 Peter and Jude | David R. Helm

1–3 John | David L. Allen

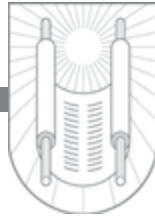
Revelation | James M. Hamilton Jr.

The Sermon on the Mount | R. Kent Hughes

((PREACHING *the* WORD))

1 KINGS

POWER, POLITICS,
and the HOPE *of the* WORLD



JOHN WOODHOUSE

R. Kent Hughes
Series Editor

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

1 Kings

Copyright © 2018 by John Woodhouse

Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover design: Jon McGrath, Simplified Studio

Cover image: Adam Greene, illustrator

First printing 2018

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked *AT* are the author's translation.

Scripture quotations marked *HCSB*® are taken from *The Holman Christian Standard Bible*®. Copyright © 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2009 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. *HCSB*® is a federally registered trademark of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture references marked *JB* are from *The Jerusalem Bible*. Copyright © 1966, 1967, 1968 by Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd. and Doubleday & Co., Inc.

Scripture quotations marked *KJV* are from the *King James Version* of the Bible.

Scripture references marked *NIV* are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture references marked *REB* are from The Revised English Bible. Copyright © 1989, 2002 by Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press. Published by Oxford University Press.

Scripture references marked *RSV* are from *The Revised Standard Version*. Copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971, 1973 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author. Bracketed material in Scripture quotations are more literal translations of words or phrases in those quotations.

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-4335-1457-9

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-2453-0

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-1458-6

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-1459-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Woodhouse, John, 1949– author.

Title: 1 Kings : power, politics, and the hope of the world / John Woodhouse.

Description: Wheaton : Crossway, 2018. | Series: Preaching the word |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018021947 (print) | LCCN 2018033743 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433514586 (pdf) |

ISBN 9781433514593 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433524530 (epub) | ISBN 9781433514579 (hc)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Kings, 1st—Commentaries.

Classification: LCC BS1335.53 (ebook) | LCC BS1335.53 .W66 2018 (print) | DDC 222/.5307—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018021947>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP	28	27	26	25	24	23	22	21	20	19	18	
13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

*For
Peter O'Brien
a faithful brother in Christ,
constant friend,
and honored teacher*

Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! Because the LORD loved Israel forever, he has made you king, that you may execute justice and righteousness.

1 KINGS 10:9

Behold, something greater than Solomon is here.

MATTHEW 12:42

Contents

<i>A Word to Those Who Preach the Word</i>	13
<i>Preface</i>	15
<i>Abbreviations</i>	17
<i>Introduction: Fourteen Kings of Israel and “The King of the Jews”</i>	19

Part 1

POLITICS OR PROMISE? HOW THE KINGDOM WAS ESTABLISHED (1—2)

1 A Frail and Fading King: What Hope Can There Be? (1:1–4)	25
2 An Up-and-Coming King: “But It Shall Not Be So among You” (1:5–10)	33
3 The Right Side of History (1:11–40)	47
4 Sooner or Later . . . (1:41–53)	65
5 Good Government—What Would It Be Like? (2:1–12)	77
6 The Bible’s Disturbing News (2:12–46)	91

Part 2

THE WISDOM OF GOD: HOW THINGS WERE PUT RIGHT (3—4)

7 It’s Complicated (3:1–3)	111
8 What a Complicated World Needs (3:4–15)	123
9 The Wisdom of God to Do Justice (3:16–28)	135
10 What a Kingdom! (4)	145

Part 3

THE GOAL OF HISTORY (5—8)

The Most Important Building in the History of the World (5—7)

11	A Chosen and Precious Stone (5)	165
12	A True Perspective on the History of the Whole World (6)	177
13	The King Who Will Build (7:1–12)	195
14	The Truth about Everything (7:13–51)	205

The Church of the Living God (8)

15	King Solomon's "Church" (8:1–11)	223
16	Excited about Church? (8:12–21)	235
17	"Whatever You Ask in My Name" (8:22–53)	245
18	The Joy of God's Blessing (8:54–66)	261

Part 4

NOT YET (9—12)

19	What Could Possibly Go Wrong? (9:1–9)	273
20	Are We There Yet? (9:10–28)	281
21	"All the Treasures of Wisdom" (10)	295
22	The Failure of King Solomon (11:1–8)	307
23	There Are Consequences (11:9–25)	319
24	What Hope Can There Possibly Be? (11:26–43)	331
25	Power in Unworthy Hands (12:1–24)	341
26	The Terrifying Prospect of Actually Trusting God (12:25–33)	355

Part 5

THE POWER BEHIND EVERYTHING:
THE WORD OF THE LORD (13)

27	The Word of the Lord versus Human Religion (13:1–10)	367
28	The Word of the Lord versus Human Lies (13:11–24)	379
29	The Word of the Lord and Human Hope (13:25–34)	389

Part 6

POWER POLITICS PLAYED OUT (14—16)

30	Deceiving God (14:1–20)	401
31	Do You Dare to Hope? (14:21–31)	413
32	Where Is the Promise? (15:1–24)	425
33	Power Politics in Perspective (15:25—16:34)	441

Part 7

THE ULTIMATE QUESTION: WHO IS GOD? (17—19)

How the Drought Began (17)

34	Does Your God Rule the Rain? (17:1–7)	465
35	Is Your God Too Small? (17:8–16)	473
36	Can Your God Beat Death? (17:17–24)	483

How the Drought Ended (18)

37	The Troubler (18:1–19)	495
38	Religion for Dummies (18:20–29)	507
39	Decision Time (18:30–40)	517
40	The God Who Answers (18:41–46)	525

Not Quite What We Had Hoped (19)

41	There Is No Plan B (19)	535
----	-------------------------	-----

Part 8

THE FAILURE OF POLITICAL POWER (20—22)

42	King Ahab Did Not Destroy the Enemy (20)	553
43	King Ahab Did Not Put Things Right (21)	575
44	King Ahab Hated the Truth (22:1–14)	589
45	King Ahab Did Not Have a Listening Heart (22:15–28)	599
46	King Ahab Died (22:29–40)	609
47	The Hope of the World and the Legacy of King Ahab (22:41–53)	617

<i>Notes</i>	625
<i>Scripture Index</i>	753
<i>General Index</i>	793
<i>Index of Sermon Illustrations</i>	797

A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases, and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one’s sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one’s hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God’s Word. This means that as we stand before God’s people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God’s Word, but God’s actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God’s smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never perfectly embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our

ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s ethos backs up his logos, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but he does.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you preach the Word may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

R. Kent Hughes

Preface

I have often found myself thinking that the book of the Bible I happen to be reading, studying, or teaching at the time is the most important and brilliant book of all. The Bible is like that. Every part makes its own magnificent contribution to the powerful truth given to us in the Scriptures.

It has happened again. The book of 1 Kings has taken my breath away (an experience I am glad to share with the Queen of Sheba, 10:5). It takes us to the highest point of the Old Testament story in the astonishing, glorious kingdom of Solomon and then plunges us to the dismal depths of the reign of King Ahab. In all this our appreciation of the One greater than Solomon is profoundly enriched.

First Kings has its share of drama, but we find a different pace from 1 and 2 Samuel. Those earlier books, which set the scene for 1 Kings, were dominated by the stories of Israel's first two kings, Saul and David. First Kings tells the story of no less than fourteen kings, with most attention given to David's son Solomon at the beginning of the book and Omri's son Ahab at the end.

I have found it helpful to divide the text into eight parts, each of which has a distinct theme (see the Contents pages). Preachers who find the whole book daunting might consider several discreet series of expositions, each based on one part of the book.

Each chapter of this commentary attempts to cover a coherent unit of the text that, in my judgment, would be suitable for a particular exposition. The text considered in each chapter varies in length from a few verses to (in one case) more than a chapter. Of course some preachers in some circumstances will very properly choose to cover the text in larger units.

In this expository commentary I have taken the liberty afforded by the written form of dealing with the text in more detail than would be possible in most sermons. The chapters of the exposition therefore vary in length. There are numerous issues that would not normally appear on the surface of a Sunday sermon, but need to be sorted out to ensure an exposition is following what the text actually says. Some of this detail and some consideration of alternative views on particular points may be found in the endnotes.

I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to Kent Hughes for the kind invitation that has led to my latest discovery of the most important and brilliant book in the Bible. Thanks too to the wonderful staff at Crossway for their support and patient encouragement throughout.

John Woodhouse

Abbreviations

<i>ABD</i>	David Noel Freedman, ed., <i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> , 6 volumes (New York: Doubleday, 1992)
<i>BDB</i>	Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles Briggs, eds., <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907)
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CHALOT</i>	William L. Holladay, <i>A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Based upon the Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner</i> (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971)
Currid, <i>Atlas</i>	John D. Currid and David P. Barrett, <i>Crossway ESV Bible Atlas</i> (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010)
<i>DOTHB</i>	Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson, eds., <i>Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books</i> (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005)
<i>DOTP</i>	T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., <i>Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch</i> (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003)
<i>GKC</i>	A. E. Cowley, <i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar as Edited and Enlarged by the Late E. Kautzsch</i> , Second English Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910)
<i>IBD</i>	J. D. Douglas, ed., <i>The Illustrated Bible Dictionary</i> , 3 volumes (Leicester, UK and Wheaton, IL: Inter-Varsity Press and Tyndale House, 1980)
<i>IBH</i>	Thomas O. Lambdin, <i>Introduction to Biblical Hebrew</i> (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971)
<i>IDB</i>	George Arthur Buttrick, ed., <i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> , 4 volumes (Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1962)
<i>IDBSup</i>	Keith Crim, ed., <i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> , Supplementary Volume (Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1976)
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>TB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds., <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> , 15 volumes (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1974–2006)
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>

Introduction

FOURTEEN KINGS OF ISRAEL AND "THE KING OF THE JEWS"

1 Kings and John 19:19

The Old Testament book we know as 1 Kings tells the story of fourteen kings who ruled over all or some of the ancient Israelite people from about 961 to 850 B.C.¹ It is reasonable to ask, as we begin to read this record, why should we bother? Unless you belong to the small group of people these days who have an interest in ancient societies and their political ups and downs, why would you be interested in 1 Kings?

There are several answers to that question. One is that "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable . . ." (2 Timothy 3:16). If you believe that (and you should), start reading and expect to profit! More particularly, you can expect to profit because 1 Kings belongs to "the sacred writings, which are able to make you *wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus*" (2 Timothy 3:15). Read this book to become wise enough to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and so be saved.

That raises more questions. Particularly, how can the story of monarchs from the ninth and tenth centuries *before* Christ make us "*wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus*"?

My hope and prayer for every reader of this book is that as we listen to the story of these kings, our faith in Christ Jesus will be enriched and strengthened. You see, the kings in 1 Kings are part of the great story that has led to *the* King, who was lifted up on a cross to become the Savior of the world (see John 3:14, 15; 4:42; 12:32, 33; 1 John 4:14).

An excellent vantage point from which to see the importance of the story told in 1 Kings is the day of Jesus Christ's execution.² On that day the Roman governor of Judea had an inscription placed on the cross on which Jesus was crucified: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (John 19:19).

I am sure that Pontius Pilate thought this was a stinging insult to the Jewish people whom he despised. For him the inscription was a cruel joke: this miserable victim was their *king*! We are told that the Jewish chief priests

(understandably) repudiated the suggestion (John 19:21). For them the inscription was an offensive lie. However, Pilate had unwittingly proclaimed the truth. The frail and fading man on the cross, about to breathe his last, was indeed “The King of the Jews.” Furthermore Pilate had unconsciously intimated the significance of this declaration for the whole world by putting his unintentionally prophetic message in the languages of the known world—Aramaic, Latin, and Greek (John 19:20).

The message of “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2) is the greatest paradox in the history of the world. It defies all human wisdom. It is also the most profound, powerful, and important truth in the world: it is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24). The man who died on the cross is the Savior of the world.

The crucified one was obviously unlike any king the world has known. In his own words, “My kingdom is not of [or from] this world” (John 18:36). His reign would certainly impact this world, but not in the usual ways of worldly political power.

Pontius Pilate did not understand this, nor did the Jewish religious leaders who had delivered Jesus to the Roman authority and pressed for his execution. On an earlier occasion, in the context of similar failure to understand him, Jesus had said to the Jews who took offense at him, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that *bear witness about me . . .*” (John 5:39).

“The Scriptures . . . that bear witness about me” (we call them the Old Testament) also illuminate the inscription that was placed over Jesus as he hung on the cross. These Scriptures “bear witness” to Jesus because they promise a king of the Jews³ who will be the Savior of the world (cf. John 4:42)!⁴

It is difficult to overstate the significance of this promise. According to the promise, this king will bring to fulfillment God’s wonderful purposes for his whole creation (see, for example, Isaiah 11:1–9). These purposes are summed up at the beginning of the Old Testament in the word “blessed” (see Genesis 1:22, 28; 2:3). God’s promise to Abraham, very early in the Old Testament story, was that “blessing” will reach “all the families of the earth” through Abraham and his “offspring” (see Genesis 12:1–3, 7; 13:15, 16; 15:5; 17:7, 8). The Old Testament then records the history of God’s faithfulness to this promise. The “offspring” of Abraham became the nation of Israel—by New Testament times called “the Jews.”⁵ In the course of this history God’s promise was repeatedly reaffirmed in ways that clarified its terms. In particular, the promise came to focus on a king (see Genesis 35:11; 49:10; 1 Samuel 2:10) whose kingdom God will establish “forever” (2 Samuel 7:16).

The notice on the cross of Jesus, if we see it *in the light of these Scriptures*, is breathtaking: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” The one who died on that cross, despised and rejected by his own people (John 1:11), was the one who had been promised in these Scriptures. He is the hope of the world.

The book of 1 Kings tells the story of fourteen kings of the Jews, framed by King Solomon (chapters 1—11), arguably the greatest of them all, and King Ahab (16:29—22:40), certainly the worst of them all (so far). It is a story of power and politics in which we will learn many interesting and important things. By far the most important is the wonder of the extraordinary inscription that Pontius Pilate put on the cross when seen in the light of these Scriptures. The story of these kings will (as Jesus put it) “bear witness about me.” Our task is to listen carefully to this testimony.

Part 1

POLITICS OR PROMISE?

How the Kingdom Was Established

1 Kings 1—2

1

A Frail and Fading King: What Hope Can There Be?

1 KINGS 1:1–4



FIRST KINGS IS A REMARKABLE STORY of power and politics. We will read of the rise and fall of kings, of political intrigue, violence, betrayal, power deployed for good and for evil. We will see an empire established and prospering. We will see the same empire collapse in ruins. It is a story of striking accomplishments and devastating failures. In all this it is much like any slice of human history.

But there is more. This is the story of God’s purpose for human history. It is a story intended to teach us to see human power and politics for what they really are, to understand that the world will not be saved by human muscle and planning. There is hope for this troubled world, but we need to know that the best efforts of men and women will achieve little, and even what is accomplished will not last.

The opening scene of 1 Kings is confronting. It is a pathetic picture of weakness and vulnerability:

Now King David was old and advanced in years. And although they covered him with clothes, he could not get warm. (v. 1)

Great King David—the Sequel (v. 1a)

“Now King David . . .”¹ (v. 1a). The first words of 1 Kings signal that what we are about to read is the continuation of the story of King David’s life that has been the subject of the two preceding books, 1 and 2 Samuel. David first appeared in 1 Samuel 16, the youngest son of Jesse of Bethlehem. David’s

tumultuous journey to become Israel's great king (in 2 Samuel 5:1–5) is told in one of the world's finest pieces of narrative literature. It is not our task here to rehearse that marvelous story, but the reader of 1 Kings is expected to know at least two critical things about King David.

The Man after God's Own Heart

The first is that David had been chosen by God to be king over God's people, Israel. He was the man on whom God set his heart to be a king “for myself,” as the Lord said to the prophet Samuel (see 1 Samuel 13:14; 16:1).

Hannah's prophetic prayer at the beginning of 1 Samuel had anticipated this:

The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces;
against them he will thunder in heaven.
The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;
he will give strength to his king
and exalt the horn of his anointed. (1 Samuel 2:10)

It was David who became “his king,” “his anointed.” The Lord exalted David and his kingdom (2 Samuel 5:10, 12) and by him crushed the enemies of his people (see, for example, 2 Samuel 8). David became a great and good king who did “justice and righteousness for all his people” (2 Samuel 8:15, AT).

However, as Hannah's prayer suggested, God's purpose in choosing David was greater than anything that happened in David's lifetime (“The LORD will judge *the ends of the earth*”). This was made clear in God's momentous promise to David recorded in 2 Samuel 7:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever. (vv. 12–16)

As we begin to read 1 Kings, nothing is more important than keeping in mind this promise. We will see that the words almost provide a Table of Contents for much of 1 Kings.² They are a sure guide to the meaning and significance of the history that 1 Kings recounts, as each part of this promise becomes historical reality.

Therefore as we see King David “old and advanced in years” (v. 1), we should remember the promise that began, “When your days are fulfilled . . .” (2 Samuel 7:12).³ There is more here than a shivering old man huddled under his blankets. This man was God’s king, and these were the days spoken of in the promise that his kingdom will be established forever.

The Man Who Sinned against the Lord

The second thing about David that all readers of 1 Kings must remember is the alarming turn his story took when David committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged for the murder of her husband, Uriah (2 Samuel 11). David, the great and good king, showed himself capable of disastrous foolishness and terrible wickedness. The consequences were dreadful. His family was wracked with violence (see the horror of Amnon’s David-like behavior in 2 Samuel 13), and he almost lost the kingdom to his rebellious, fratricidal son Absalom (2 Samuel 15—19). These developments raised serious questions about how God’s promise to David could ever be fulfilled. David himself was greatly diminished by his failures, and his sons (certainly if we look at Amnon and Absalom) were no better.

Remarkably the Lord did not withdraw his promise to David. Earlier the Lord had rejected Saul because Saul had rejected the word of the Lord (1 Samuel 15:23, 26). The Lord treated David differently. The difference was made clear in the promise concerning David’s son:

When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. (2 Samuel 7:14b, 15).

While this promise focused on David’s future son, it was reflected in David’s own experience. Terrible consequences flowed from David’s wickedness. He was disciplined with the rod of men (2 Samuel 13—20). However, when he acknowledged his evil deeds (“I have sinned against the LORD,” 2 Samuel 12:13a), he heard from Nathan the prophet the astonishing words, “The LORD also has put away your sin” (2 Samuel 12:13b). The Lord’s steadfast love did not depart from him.

This meant that David could sing the Lord’s praises in these terms:

Great salvation he brings to his king,
and shows steadfast love to his anointed,
to David and his offspring forever. (2 Samuel 22:51)

However, 1 Kings begins with a scene that makes us wonder whether, after all, we are near the end of the story of David and his great kingdom. There is little to be seen here of the greatness or goodness of King David.

Great King David—Now Frail and Fading (vv. 1–4)

With these things in mind, let's look more closely at the strange scene with which our book begins.⁴ The full royal title ("King David" in v. 1) and the six references to him as "the king" in verses 1–4 remind us of who this man had been. What we now see, however, is his frail and feeble condition.⁵

King David's Frailty (v. 1)

"Now King David was old and advanced in years" (v. 1a). He was now about seventy years old (see 2 Samuel 5:4; 1 Kings 2:11), but rather less sprightly than some seventy-year-olds I know. He was bedridden and appears to have been suffering from advanced arteriosclerosis.⁶ "Although they covered him with clothes, he could not get warm" (v. 1b).

It has been suggested (encouraged, no doubt, by the way this scene plays out in vv. 2–4) that the king's inability to "get warm" is really a rather polite way of saying that he was sexually impotent,⁷ in a world in which "the authority and even the life of the king depends on his virility."⁸ This reads too much into verse 1 and makes the all too common mistake of interpreting the Bible in the light of a supposed background for which the Bible itself gives no evidence.⁹ The king's problem here was one that extra blankets¹⁰ should have solved but didn't. The old man was cold! The once great king, now weak and infirm, was a shivering shadow of the mighty ruler he had been.

A Pathetic Plan (vv. 2, 3)

Therefore his servants said to him, "Let a young woman be sought for my¹¹ lord the king, and let her wait on the king and be in his service. Let her lie in your¹² arms, that my lord the king may be warm." (v. 2)

The king's servants¹³ wanted to help their quivering king. They suggested a rather surprising plan to help raise David's temperature. For three reasons it is difficult to avoid the sexual overtones of their proposal.¹⁴

First, the Hebrew phrase translated "a young woman" (sometimes rendered "a young virgin"¹⁵) almost certainly has a sexual nuance here. In Hebrew a word is used that indicates the young woman was to be "sexually mature, of marriageable age."¹⁶

Second, if the requirement is that this young woman should be sexually

mature, the otherwise innocent expression “let her wait on the king and be in his service”¹⁷ sounds like an understatement. She was to be more than his nurse.¹⁸

Third, the “more” is clarified with the words, “Let her lie in your arms” (literally “in your bosom,” *ESV* margin). While there is still some appropriate indirectness in this expression (it does not *necessarily* mean what it seems to mean here), the proposal of the king’s servants is clear enough. Indeed they used exactly the same expression as Nathan in his devastating parable about David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:3; cf. v. 8).¹⁹

Here was the servants’ plan to revitalize their frail old king. They knew David’s reputation. A beautiful young woman in his bed would surely “warm my lord the king”!²⁰ I think I can see a nudge and a wink as the idea was put forward.

But it was a pathetic plan. There is more than a hint of denial. Pretending to be young again will not reverse advancing age and diminishing capacities. Aging men (and aging women), take note. Furthermore it was a wicked plan. The idea of the king taking a young woman into his bed for the purpose of arousing his fading vitality should shock us.²¹ It is all too reminiscent of the day David took Bathsheba and lay with her for his own selfish purposes (2 Samuel 11:4).²²

So they sought for a beautiful young woman throughout all the territory of Israel, and found Abishag the Shunammite, and brought her to the king.
(v. 3)

Verse 3 indicates (without saying so) that King David agreed to the plan. At least he did not object. If the plan was pathetic and wicked, what does that tell us about David?

The search was undertaken (presumably in the name of the king) “throughout all the territory of Israel” to find the most “beautiful young woman” in all the land (v. 3a).

It is difficult not to be reminded again that the greatest disaster of David’s life had begun when the younger king had spied a “very beautiful” woman from the roof of his palace (2 Samuel 11:2).²³

The winner of the Miss Israel beauty contest was from the northern town of Shunem.²⁴ Her name was Abishag.

King David’s Frailty (v. 4)

When they brought Abishag to King David’s bedroom, we are told that indeed “The young woman was very beautiful” (v. 4a). She did what was expected of

her: “she was of service to the king and attended to him” (v. 4b). This reproduces some vocabulary from verse 2, but leaves to the reader’s imagination what she actually did.²⁵ We are simply told, rather anticlimactically, “but the king knew her not” (v. 4c)—the well-known Biblical idiom meaning he did not have sex with her.

Some readers have thought that this last phrase is reassuring, as though the narrator²⁶ had said: *Don’t get the wrong idea. This was not about sex. Abishag was just a rather attractive hot water bottle.*²⁷

But I don’t think so. The last verse of the episode echoes the first. The bedclothes had failed: “he could not get warm” (v. 1). Now the more audacious plan had also failed: “the king knew her not” (v. 4). David was too old. He was too weak. He was too cold. The servants’ pathetic plan to arouse the king and revive his strength had failed. He was simply no longer up to it.²⁸

As we prepare to read the story that 1 Kings will tell, think about this bleak scene: the frail and fading King David, beyond human help, beyond human hope.

All of us who are permitted to live long enough will experience something like this. Our strength of body and mind will wane. We will lose our independence. Whatever we have been, we will become but a shadow of what we once were, as David did. And we will know that death is approaching, as it was for David. Visit a nursing home and spend some time with frail old people. It is difficult to imagine what they have been and what they have done when they were young, fit, and healthy. We all find this confronting. None of us likes to think about this reality, but reality it will be for all of us—unless, of course, we suffer the even greater tragedy of premature death.

The Bible does not ignore this reality. Looking at King David, near the end of his life, quivering under his blankets, unresponsive to the beautiful young woman beside him, we are confronted with human mortality. David had been one of the greatest and best men to have ever lived. For many years he had been the one who led Israel to victory over enemies. He had been the “shepherd of [God’s] people Israel” (see 2 Samuel 5:2). But his goodness and greatness were not only undermined by his wickedness and weakness (as we have noted)—he grew old, weak, and cold. Human power at its best does not last long. Nothing human lasts forever. What hope could there be for Israel when their great king was now so weak that he could not even get warm? What hope can there be for the world when every human ruler, every human power, every political system, every scheme to make a better world will sooner or later fade away—just like King David?

There is more. David had been *God’s* king, whose throne, God had prom-

ised, “shall be established forever” (2 Samuel 7:16). How is it possible to believe God’s promise when we see his chosen king frail and fading away? What would it take for God’s promise to be fulfilled?

These are the kind of questions raised by the frail and fading king we see in the opening scene of 1 Kings. Was *this* God’s king? Had God really promised that *his* kingdom would be “made sure forever before me” (2 Samuel 7:16)? How can that be?

God’s promise to David gives us a clue: “When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up *your offspring after you* . . . and I will establish *his* kingdom” (2 Samuel 7:12). In our next chapter we will meet one of David’s offspring who would very much have liked to be the promised one.

Before we meet Adonijah let us turn our eyes from the day they tried to warm old King David with blankets and a beautiful Shunammite girl to the day, centuries later, when Jesus was hanging on a cross outside the same city in which old David had trembled with cold. Perhaps Jesus was cold. He was thirsty (John 19:28). He was weak. The sign above his head must have seemed like a cruel joke: “JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.” He was certainly beyond human help. However, even more powerfully than shivering old King David, Jesus on the cross reminds us of the promise of God. Unlike Adonijah, Jesus *was* the promised offspring of David (Matthew 1:1; Romans 1:3; 2 Timothy 2:8). God has now established *his* kingdom forever by raising him from the dead (see Matthew 28:18; Acts 13:32, 33; Romans 1:4; Ephesians 1:19–22). The apparent hopelessness of old King David is like the apparent hopelessness of the crucified Jesus. But in that hopelessness, if we remember God’s promise, we see the hope of the world:

. . . we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. (1 John 4:14)

2

An Up-and-Coming King: “But It Shall Not Be So among You”

1 KINGS 1:5–10



JESUS SAID:

You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles [nations] lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42–45)

Who do you think he had in mind when he mentioned the “rulers of the nations”? Perhaps it was the Roman authorities of his day. Or was he (as I suspect) thinking of Old Testament Israel’s desire to have a king “like all the nations” (1 Samuel 8:5, 20)? He may have had in mind Samuel’s devastating critique of the ways of a king like all the nations: “He will take . . . he will take . . . he will take . . .” (1 Samuel 8:10–18).

Jesus said, “But it shall not be so among you.”

The ways of God’s King are very different from the ways of human politics and power. This is not a lesson that we find easy to learn. Certainly it is very difficult to practice. However, when we see a Christian following Jesus in this regard (seeking not to be served but to serve) we recognize the goodness of it. On the other hand, when we see (as we frequently do)

someone behaving like “the rulers of the nations,” we can often see the ugliness of it.

As I write these words the newspapers in my part of the world are full of yet another battle between our political leaders. It is ugly. Power plays, arrogance, selfish ambition, dishonesty, manipulation, suspicion, greed, cynicism, malice, anger, self-righteousness can all be seen (compare Colossians 3:5–11). There is not much compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, trust, love, or forgiveness on display (compare Colossians 3:12, 13).

In Christian circles such conflicts are usually (although not always, I regret to say) more refined. But even among us it is all too easy to think that “church politics” (for want of a better expression) can be conducted along the lines of worldly affairs. It is difficult for those engaged in such things to heed Jesus’ words, “It shall not be so among you.” Those of us who have been involved in the appointment of Christian leaders or the conduct of Christian organizations have probably found ourselves—at least some of the time—playing power games, thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought, ambitious for ourselves, manipulative, showing partiality or even malice, and being less than openly honest. We may justify ourselves with some kind of end-justifying-means thinking, but the words of Jesus call us to account: “It shall not be so among you.”

One of the outstanding aspects of the story of King David is that his elevation to the throne of Israel was remarkably Christlike. In the story from 1 Samuel 16 through 2 Samuel 5, David’s conduct under severe pressure was exemplary. He did not grasp at power or exalt himself or revile or threaten those who reviled him. He humbly and obediently waited, trusting God (cf. Philippians 2:5–10; 1 Peter 2:23). Many of David’s psalms belong to this story (see, for example, Psalms 3, 34, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142, noting the superscriptions¹). In wonderful ways David foreshadowed the greater Son of David who “came not to be served but to serve.”

To appreciate the story of David’s life we need to remember two things. The first is that David’s goodness and greatness were a consequence of the Lord’s kindness toward him. He was the man God had chosen to be his own king (1 Samuel 13:14; 16:1; 2 Samuel 7:21). He was great and good *because* “the LORD was with him” (see 1 Samuel 3:19; 16:18; 18:12, 14; 2 Samuel 5:10). The second thing to remember is that David himself was a flawed human being, capable of shocking wickedness (see 2 Samuel 11, 12). *Only* by the kindness of God could he be the Lord’s king (see 2 Samuel 7:14, 15; 12:13; 15:25, 26).

In 1 Kings 1 David had become old. We have seen his frailty and the

well-meaning but foolish attempt to rejuvenate the king (1:1–4). The second scene in 1 Kings 1 now takes us out of the old king's bedchamber to see one of David's sons, the vigorous, forceful, assertive, confident Adonijah. He was a complete contrast to his father—in more ways than one.

I have suggested that the key to understanding 1 Kings is the historic promise that the Lord had made concerning David's kingdom:

"When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom." (2 Samuel 7:12)

It is no surprise then that the narrative moves from the fading King David in his final days to one of his sons. Could this be the promised son of David?

The Up-And-Coming King? (v. 5)

Adonijah was David's fourth son (see 2 Samuel 3:2–5). His first, Amnon, had been murdered by his younger half-brother Absalom (2 Samuel 13:23–33). David's second son, Chileab, probably died at a young age, since nothing is recorded about him after the mention of his birth in 2 Samuel 3:3. Absalom was David's third son. He was killed in battle as he attempted to overthrow his father and make himself king (2 Samuel 18:9–15). Adonijah therefore was, at the time of 1 Kings 1, David's oldest surviving son.

These first four of David's sons (and a couple of others) had been born in the early days of David's reign, when he ruled over the tribe of Judah from the town of Hebron (see 2 Samuel 2:1–4; 3:5). Each son had a different mother.² They were therefore half-brothers, which contributed to some of the conflicts that arose between them.³ As Adonijah is reintroduced to the narrative, we are reminded which of David's wives was his mother: "Now Adonijah the son of Haggith . . ." (v. 5a). We know nothing more about Haggith than that she was one of David's wives and the mother of Adonijah. It is more than a little likely, however, that there were tensions between Haggith and other wives of David.⁴

Adonijah has not appeared by name in the story of David's kingdom since his birth notice in 2 Samuel 3:4. However, he was among "all the king's sons" who had witnessed Absalom's murder of Amnon, fled from Absalom in fear for their own lives, and wept with their father at the tragedy (2 Samuel 13:23, 29, 36). He was later among those threatened by Absalom's coup and saved by Joab's execution of Absalom (see 2 Samuel 19:5).

Now he was David's oldest living son, probably about thirty-five years old.⁵ The principle of primogeniture had not yet been established in Israel,

although it was assumed. Saul had expected his eldest son Jonathan to succeed him (1 Samuel 20:31) unless something exceptional happened, which it did. We are not at all surprised at the narrative turning now to David's oldest surviving son—unless something exceptional happens, which it will.

However, a careful reader of this narrative may have already realized something exceptional about this situation. The promise in 2 Samuel 7:12 spoke of a son who had (at the time of the promise) not yet been born (“who *shall* come from your body”). That cannot be Adonijah. He had been born in Hebron years *before* this promise was given to David in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 3:4).

His Thoughts (v. 5a)

The first thing we are told about this son of David is that he “exalted himself” (v. 5a). Already there is dissonance with the promise, “I will raise up your offspring” (2 Samuel 7:12). Furthermore it was *the Lord* who had “exalted” David and his kingdom (2 Samuel 5:12).⁶ Adonijah exalted *himself*.

The Hebrew expression suggests that this was Adonijah's habitual disposition.⁷ For some time he had had a very high opinion of himself, and he thought that others should share it. We will shortly see a number of factors that contributed to Adonijah's self-esteem problem, but it was a problem of his own making: he exalted *himself*.

These days we hear more about the problem of low self-esteem. Whatever difficulties may arise from a person having a low estimate of himself or herself, that was not Adonijah's problem. Indeed, I wonder whether these days we would recognize that Adonijah had a problem at all. He was self-confident, assertive, assured of his own worth and importance. Aren't those the qualities needed to get on in this world? Indeed, aren't they the qualities we look for in our leaders?

Jesus said, “It shall not be so among you.”

His Words (v. 5b)

Adonijah's thoughts about himself were put into words: “I will be king” (v. 5b). Again the Hebrew has an emphasis we can miss in translation: “*I* am the one—I am the only one—who will be king.”⁸

We do not know whether these were words spoken to others⁹ or only to himself.¹⁰ We will shortly be reminded that Adonijah's expectation to become the next king was apparently reasonable. He was, after all, the oldest son of the old king. He had a right to the throne. He was the obvious candidate. We might say (I'm sure he would say), he was *entitled*.

There was excitement in his words. He was thrilled at the prospect: “I will be king!” Adonijah *so wanted* to be king. The emphasis (again from a subtlety of the Hebrew) is more on the active exercise of royal power than simply the status of the position.¹¹ Adonijah was elated at the prospect of being the one who wielded the power of the king.

Once again I wonder whether these days we would recognize any problem in Adonijah’s ambition. It is generally seen as a virtue when an aspirant for high office has a hunger for the job.¹² Whatever wisdom there may be in that perception, do you think that the words of Jesus might suggest a better way? “It shall not be so among you.”

Adonijah’s eagerness to *become* king should remind us of that day many years earlier when the elders of Israel demanded to be *given* a king because they wanted to be “like all the nations,” and Samuel warned them about the kind of king that the nations had. I have no doubt that Adonijah wanted to be *that* kind of king. The person who exalts himself and grasps for power will be like “the rulers of the nations” of whom Jesus spoke. However, “It shall not be so among you.”

His Conduct (v. 5c)

Adonijah’s thoughts and words found expression in his public conduct: “And he prepared for himself chariots and horsemen [horses], and fifty men to run before him” (v. 5c).

If you think you have heard something like this before, it probably means that you have read 1 and 2 Samuel (as I hope you have). Adonijah was doing what his older brother Absalom had done as well as what Samuel had warned a king “like the nations” would do. Indeed there seems to be a deliberate echo of the historian’s earlier descriptions of these activities. Compare the three descriptions:

“[Adonijah] prepared for himself	“Absalom prepared for himself	“[a king] will take your sons and appoint them for himself
chariots ¹³	a chariot	to his chariot
and horses, ¹⁴	and horses,	and his horses
and fifty men to run before him.” (1 Kings 1:5c, AT)	and fifty men to run before him.” (2 Samuel 15:1, AT)	and to run before his chariot.” (1 Samuel 8:11, AT)

Adonijah (like Absalom before him¹⁵) adopted the trappings of status and power “like the nations.”¹⁶ He made himself *look* powerful and important, and he loved it.

Beware of the trappings of positions of prominence, whether ecclesiastical or secular (see Luke 20:46). Be especially careful of those who love such things. That is what Adonijah was like. Again let the words of Jesus ring in your ears: “It shall not be so among you.”

The Persuasiveness of His Self-Portrayal (v. 6)

Mind you, Adonijah’s self-promoting behavior was not entirely surprising. In verse 6 we are informed of three factors that must have contributed to his sense of self-importance and to the persuasiveness of his self-portrayal.

His Father’s Favor (v. 6a)

The first was something his father did not do: “His father had never at any time displeased him by asking, ‘Why have you done thus and so?’” (v. 6a). This rather telling comment on David’s indulgent treatment of his son is consistent with the king’s dealings with his two older sons. When Amnon raped Tamar we read that David was “very angry” (2 Samuel 13:21), but he did nothing.¹⁷ David’s grief over the death of Absalom was seen, at least by Joab, to be excessive and improperly overlooked the boy’s violent crimes (2 Samuel 19:5–7). David was a passive father. The problem was not anything he did, but what he did not do.

Parents who love their children (as David certainly did) understand how difficult it can be to deal firmly with unacceptable behavior. Some (like David) try to avoid conflict. They do not set or enforce boundaries for their children. It is hardly surprising when these children grow up without valuing self-control, but rather with a sense of entitlement to whatever they want. Children spared the experience of frustration in their younger days will not be well equipped to deal with reality. This is a failure of parental love.

However, David’s passivity toward Adonijah was not just an example of poor parenting, although it was that. The focus here is on David’s failure to challenge his son’s self-promotion, which could easily be understood as the king’s endorsement of the lad’s ambition. David’s silence would have been an encouragement to Adonijah and to anyone inclined to support him.

His Attractive Presence (v. 6b)

Furthermore, Adonijah “was also¹⁸ a very handsome man” (v. 6b). Israelite society shared with our world an attraction to beautiful people. Absalom had also been a beautiful young man. “Now in all Israel there was no one so much to be praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom” (2 Samuel 14:25). We can be

sure that Adonijah, like his older brother, was very conscious of his good looks (see 2 Samuel 14:26). I can imagine him with a regular exercise regime, not so much for fitness, but to *look* good. I am sure his clothes mattered a lot to him: he had to show off his magnificence. Also like Absalom before him, Adonijah’s good looks contributed to both his self-confidence and his popularity.

The Bible is generally cautious about the value of such external appearances. It is not that there is any virtue in ugliness. The Bible writer seems positive about the good looks of David (see 1 Samuel 16:12).¹⁹ However, appearances can powerfully deceive. Saul was “a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he” (1 Samuel 9:2). And yet Saul was a disaster. Absalom’s beauty hid a violent, rebellious character (the story is told in 2 Samuel 13—18). The mention of Adonijah’s appearance (literally “very good of form”²⁰) at this point, with its reminders of Absalom and Saul, is not encouraging.

His Privileged Place (v. 6c)

The third factor contributing to Adonijah’s sense of importance was his privileged position: “he was born next after Absalom” (v. 6c). He was, as we have noted, the oldest surviving son of the king. He had every right (one might think) to say, “I will be king.”

These three factors seem to represent Adonijah’s perspective on himself. His father approved of him (since he never disapproved). He was stunning to look at. And he was entitled.

There follows a brief account of Adonijah’s strategic moves to obtain what he longed for and considered his right. It is a striking instance of the ways human beings typically pursue power. Adonijah could have written the manual for becoming a great one like “the rulers of the nations.”

Four Steps to Self-Exaltation (vv. 7–10)

Step 1: Garner Support (v. 7)

Step One involved talking to the right people and getting them on your side. These days we call it networking. Adonijah targeted two key individuals whose support would greatly strengthen him and who, for different reasons, he may have expected to be sympathetic to his cause.

Joab (v. 7a)

“He conferred with Joab the son of Zeruiah” (v. 7a).²¹ David’s nephew, Joab, had been David’s powerful military commander (2 Samuel 8:16). Like his

brothers Abishai and Asahel, Joab was fiercely loyal to David and his kingdom, but often considered that he knew better than David, and did not hesitate in such circumstances to take matters into his own hands.²² After one such incident (when Joab and Abishai had killed Abner, Saul's old commander, although David had wanted to make peace with him), David said, "These men, the sons of Zeruiah, are more severe than I. The LORD repay the evildoer according to his wickedness!" (2 Samuel 3:39; also v. 29). There is little doubt who David regarded as "the evildoer."²³ It was Joab.

More recently Joab had been responsible for the death of Absalom, directly contrary to David's orders (see 2 Samuel 18:5, 14). In an astonishing move David appointed Amasa as commander in place of Joab. Amasa was the man Absalom had made commander of his rebel army (see 2 Samuel 17:25; 19:13). Joab dealt with this difficulty by killing Amasa (2 Samuel 20:1–10) and taking control again. We are given the clear impression that in the end Joab was still loyal to David's kingdom, but the relationship with David himself had become difficult, to say the least (see 2:5–6).

Adonijah was astute in conferring with Joab. Joab was a very powerful man in Jerusalem, and he was unlikely to wait around for David's approval. If Joab was convinced that Adonijah was the right man to succeed David, he could certainly help it happen.

Abiathar (v. 7b, c)

"... and with Abiathar the priest" (v. 7b). Adonijah was not a fool. He wanted not only the power of Joab on his side, but also the legitimacy of Abiathar the priest.

Abiathar was the son of Ahimelech, grandson of Ahitub (1 Samuel 22:20), great-grandson of Phinehas, and great-great-grandson of Eli (1 Samuel 14:3). This family line will be important in due course because many years earlier "a man of God" had pronounced God's judgment on the household of Eli for the wicked corruption of Eli's sons, Hophni and Phineas (1 Samuel 2:27–36).²⁴ It is important to remember this prophecy. Events to be recounted shortly must be understood in its light (2:27).

The prophesied judgment had unfolded over time. First, Eli and his sons died on the same day (1 Samuel 2:34; 4:11, 18). Years later in the days of Saul, descendants of Eli, including his great-grandson Ahimelech, were massacred at Nob (1 Samuel 22:1–19). The prophecy had anticipated that there would be one survivor ("the only one of you whom I shall not cut off from my altar," 1 Samuel 2:33). The survivor was Abiathar (1 Samuel 22:20). He found safety with David (1 Samuel 22:23), served David faithfully through the dif-

ficult days on the run from Saul (1 Samuel 23:6, 9; 30:7; see 2 Samuel 8:17), and played an important role in saving David from Absalom's attempted coup (2 Samuel 15:24, 29, 35; 17:15; 19:11; 20:25).

Why did Adonijah think that his ambitions would find encouragement from Abiathar? We are not told. Some have suggested that Joab and Abiathar represented the older and more conservative elements in Jerusalem, having been with David since the very early days.²⁵ Did Adonijah, who had been born in the early days of David's kingship in Hebron and who was after all the oldest son still living, perhaps expect the support of the conservative old guard, especially against any new and unconventional ideas that may have been emerging in Jerusalem (about which we will hear more in due course)?

Furthermore, since the move of David's base from Hebron to Jerusalem a new leading priest had emerged. This was Zadok (2 Samuel 8:17), about whom we will hear more shortly. Was the tension between old and new expressed in some rivalry or resentment between Abiathar and Zadok? Was this something that Adonijah thought he could exploit to his own advantage?

We do not know the answers to these questions, but they point to the complexity of the relationships in Jerusalem. We are left with the fact that for some reason Adonijah chose to approach Joab and Abiathar. It proved to be a masterstroke: "And they followed Adonijah and helped him" (v. 7c).

At least it looked like a masterstroke. The prophecy in the days of Eli had said, "The only one of you whom I shall not cut off from my altar shall be spared *to weep his eyes out to grieve his heart, and all the descendants of your house shall die by the sword of men*" (1 Samuel 2:33). We do not know how widely this prophecy was known. I doubt that it was a factor in Adonijah's thinking, but Abiathar may have known about it. If so I am sure he did not realize that his decision to support Adonijah would become a critical factor in the fulfillment of this devastating prophecy (as we will see).

Step 2: Identify Opposition (v. 8)

Step Two in Adonijah's plan to make himself great involved identifying the opposition. Verse 8 tells us of a number of people who "were not with Adonijah." This must at least mean that they did not approve of his public displays of pomp (v. 5c) and the aspirations they expressed.

Zadok (v. 8a)

The first of these was "Zadok the priest" (v. 8a). While there has been speculation about the identity of Zadok (much of which disregards some Biblical

evidence²⁶), the available information indicates that he was a descendant of Aaron's third son, Eleazar, while Abiathar was a descendant of Aaron's fourth son, Ithamar (1 Chronicles 24:3).²⁷

Zadok came to prominence after David had taken up residence in Jerusalem (he first appears in the history in 2 Samuel 8:17). He became (with Abiathar) one of the two leading priests in David's kingdom.

With the wisdom of hindsight we can see that the old prophecy from the days of Eli pointed to Zadok: "And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. And I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed forever" (1 Samuel 2:35). The house of Zadok was to replace the house of Eli.

If Abiathar suspected this, then some tension between the two priests would be understandable. All we are told here is that Zadok was "not with Adonijah." In this he would prove to be on the right side of history.

Benaiah (v. 8b)

"Benaiah the son of Jehoiada" (v. 8b) was also "not with Adonijah." Benaiah was another man who came into the story of David's kingdom after David had taken Jerusalem. He was a commander alongside Joab, with responsibility for "the Cherethites and the Pelethites"²⁸ (2 Samuel 8:18; 20:23), and apparently David's personal bodyguard (2 Samuel 23:23). He was one of David's mighty men who had won a name for great feats in war (2 Samuel 23:20–23).

NATHAN (v. 8c)

More important than Zadok the priest and Benaiah the soldier was "Nathan the prophet" (v. 8c). He, too, was "not with Adonijah."

The mention of Nathan (for the first time in this story since 2 Samuel 12) reminds us of the three very significant moments in David's story in which Nathan played a crucial role.

The first was the promise of 2 Samuel 7. It was Nathan who spoke those words of the Lord to David (2 Samuel 7:17). According to this promise a son of David, yet to be born at the time of the promise, would become the king whose kingdom would be established forever by the Lord. That is one reason that Nathan may have been "not with Adonijah."

Second, it was Nathan who brought David to his senses after the Bathsheba/Uriah affair. The Lord sent Nathan to David, and Nathan delivered to David the Lord's severe rebuke for what he had done (2 Samuel 12:1–12).

When David confessed his sin, it was Nathan who told him, “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die” (2 Samuel 12:13).

Third, when Bathsheba bore a son to David (after the first son had died), it was Nathan who brought word that this boy was loved by the Lord. For this reason Solomon was also given the name Jedidiah (“beloved of the LORD,” 2 Samuel 12:24, 25). In the light of the great 2 Samuel 7 promise, it is difficult to miss the implication that Solomon was the one the Lord had promised to raise up after David. This was almost certainly behind Nathan’s being “not with Adonijah.”

Shimei and Rei (v. 8d)

Two other nonsupporters of Adonijah are mentioned by name: “Shimei and Rei” (v. 8d). This Shimei was almost certainly not the son of Gera who had appeared in David’s story previously (2 Samuel 16:5–14; 19:16–23) and who will tragically appear again (1 Kings 2:8, 9, 36–46).²⁹ He may have been the son of Ela who would serve as an official in Solomon’s kingdom (1 Kings 4:18). Rei is otherwise unknown to us.³⁰

David’s Mighty Men (v. 8e)

It remains to mention one other significant group who were “not with Adonijah.” They were “David’s mighty men” (v. 8e). These great heroes of David’s many conflicts were celebrated in 2 Samuel 23:8–39. Interestingly in that catalog of names and accomplishments, Joab was not included.

The fact that these great ones, as well as Benaiah, “were not with Adonijah” would have been a significant obstacle to Adonijah’s hopes. Something would need to be done to ensure that support for Adonijah somehow counterbalanced the nonsupport.

Step 3: Consolidate Support (v. 9)

This was Step Three in Adonijah’s strategy. Strictly speaking verses 5–8 have been background to the action that begins in verse 9.³¹

What He Did (v. 9a)

“Adonijah sacrificed³² sheep, oxen, and fattened cattle” (v. 9a). Since we have already been clearly reminded of how Adonijah was thinking, acting and even looking like his older brother, this feast should remind us of Absalom’s great get-together at Hebron when he arranged to have himself declared king (2 Samuel 15:7–12). We are not told that Adonijah went that far, but we will soon hear that Nathan believed he had (1:11, 12).

Where He Did It (v. 9b)

The location of Adonijah's big event was "by the Serpent's Stone, which is beside En-rogel" (v. 9b). En-rogel was about 300 yards south of Jerusalem, near where the north-south Kidron Valley east of Jerusalem meets the west-east Hinnom Valley south of the city.³³ The somewhat secluded location suggests the clandestine character of this gathering.³⁴ En-rogel had earlier been chosen for a rather different covert operation (2 Samuel 17:17).

The more particular setting for the meeting sounds ominous (ESV, "by the Serpent's Stone"), but may have been simply a known rockslide in the vicinity (JB, "the Sliding Stone"³⁵).

Who He Included (v. 9c)

The guest list for Adonijah's supporters' function included "all his brothers, the king's sons, and all the royal officials of Judah" (v. 9c).

That is not quite accurate. As with much of this passage, the wording tends to give us Adonijah's view of things. Perhaps we could say that he invited all the king's sons whom he regarded as his "brothers." One, as we will see in the next verse, was not included.

Inviting the king's sons to a big feast the purpose of which was not entirely open must remind us again of Absalom. The thought is ominous (see 2 Samuel 13:23–29).

"All the royal officials of Judah" is more literally "all the men of Judah, the servants of the king." Did this include "his servants" (1:2) who had recently witnessed the sorry condition of the old king? If so, what a contrast the vigorous, self-confident Adonijah must have made!³⁶

No details are given of what happened at the Serpent's Stone/Sliding Rock. Clearly, however, Adonijah was drawing around him those he hoped would support his ambitions. He had "exalted himself" (v. 5). He wanted others to exalt him too.

Step 4: Isolate Opposition (v. 10)

Step Four was to keep those who would not be supportive away. The ambitious man did not want to hear from anyone who was not likely to endorse his aspirations. We may reasonably assume that none of those mentioned in verse 8 were invited. Verse 10 mentions some of those but adds a significant new name.

"But he did not invite Nathan the prophet . . ." (v. 10a). Of course he didn't. What Nathan stood for was not what Adonijah's party was about.

"... or Benaiah" (v. 10b). Adonijah had Joab on his side. He did not need Benaiah, nor did he want him. Benaiah was not a known supporter. Certainly he did not invite "the mighty men" (v. 10c). It could have been dangerous for Adonijah's unfolding plans to be known to such a powerful group, who were known to be nonsupporters.

Of the nonsupporters of Adonijah listed in verse 8, Zadok, Shimei, and Rei are not mentioned in verse 10. But we can be sure they, too, were not invited. Those who were not expected to back Adonijah were not welcome.

The final excluded name mentioned is explosive: "... or Solomon his brother" (v. 10d). There was this one exception to "all his brothers" in verse 9. We are not told in so many words why Solomon was not invited. Possibly some difficulty in the relationship between the two accounted for Adonijah's exclusion of Solomon. However, we, the readers of this history, know that the difference between Solomon and Adonijah was simply that Solomon was the one the Lord had set his heart upon (2 Samuel 12:24, 25), just as he had set his heart on David (1 Samuel 13:14). Consciously or unconsciously, Adonijah's ambitions could only survive if he kept the one chosen by the Lord out of his life.

Adonijah was the very opposite of what his father David had been as the Lord exalted him and made him king. Consider the portrait of Adonijah we have seen: his high opinion of himself; his aspiration to be important; his love of *displaying* his own importance; his gathering of like-minded people around him; his avoidance of those who did not share his view of himself.

Hear Jesus' call: "But it shall not be so among you. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." This is as important as anything that a leader among God's people needs to hear.



The PREACHING *the*
WORD SERIES
IS WRITTEN BY
PASTORS FOR PASTORS
AND THEIR CHURCHES



crossway.org/preachingtheword

The Preaching the Word series is written
BY PASTORS FOR PASTORS
and their churches

Preaching the Word commentaries are written by pastors for pastors, as well as for all who teach or study God's Word. With pastor R. Kent Hughes as the series editor, these volumes feature an experienced pastor or teacher who models expository preaching and practical application. This series is noted for its steadfast commitment to Biblical authority, clear exposition of Scripture, and readability, making it widely accessible for both new and seasoned pastors, as well as men and women hungering to read the Bible in a fresh way.

Walking us through the rise and fall of fourteen Israelite kings, John Woodhouse helps us understand and teach the book of 1 Kings by showing us how the failure of human power points to God's promise to establish a kingdom that will never pass away.

PRAISE FOR THIS SERIES

"This series resonates with the priorities of the pulpit. No academic aloofness here, but down-to-earth, preacher-to-preacher meat for God's people."

Bryan Chapell, Senior Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church (PCA), Peoria, Illinois

"The single best resource for faithful Biblical exposition available today. A great boon for genuine reformation!"

Timothy George, Dean, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University

"There is a long history of informed, edifying Biblical expositions that have been mightily used of God to shape and strengthen the church. These volumes admirably fit this tradition."

D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

"Throughout the Christian centuries, working pastors have been proving themselves to be the best of all Bible expositors. Kent Hughes stands in this great tradition, and his exciting expositions uphold it worthily."

J. I. Packer, Board of Governors' Professor of Theology, Regent College

"It is a pleasure to commend this series of homiletical commentaries. They fill an enormous vacuum that exists between the practical needs of the pastor/teacher and the critical exegetical depth of most commentaries."

Walter C. Kaiser Jr., President Emeritus and Distinguished Professor of Old Testament and Ethics, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARY