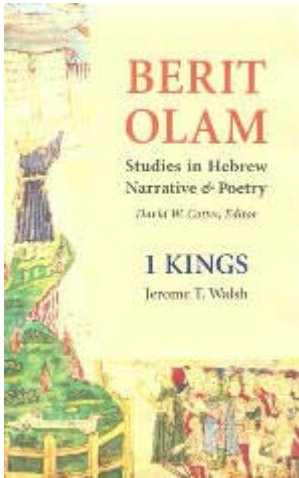


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**Walsh, Jerome T.**

***1 Kings***

Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry

Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996. Pp. xxii + 393,  
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The commentary series Berit Olam is intended to make literary readings of the Hebrew Bible accessible to a wide audience. The target group includes those with little or no knowledge of Hebrew or of literary and narrative interpretation. This particular volume in the series successfully addresses such a readership. Yet at the same time the author is able to engage the more sophisticated scholar with fresh and interesting insights into the narrative of 1 Kings. The book is "user friendly" in the sense that it begins with a primer on narrative criticism that sets forth basic terminology and methodology. In the body of the commentary, arguments grounded on the grammar and structure of the Hebrew text are usually explained clearly in non-technical style. The selected bibliography should prove useful to the volume's general audience. There is a scripture index and a helpful general index in which one may discover multiple examples of literary features such as point of view, irony, flashback and foreshadowing, and the like.

Overall, the commentary moves from the smaller units (individual stories and their subparts) to four larger text blocks that focus on four major characters: Solomon, Jeroboam, Elijah, and Ahab. The structure of the commentary varies to fit the character of specific text units. However, the usual pattern is to introduce the overall structure of a section first, then move through its subsections. After the individual stories that make up each of the four major blocks have been reviewed in a detailed way, the commentary then takes up the stories of Solomon, Jeroboam, Elijah, and Ahab as integrated wholes. A final chapter evaluates the whole book of 1 Kings from a narrative viewpoint and explores its

connections with the rest of the Hebrew Bible. For most of the story units there are special sections within the exposition that ponder characterization and narrative effect.

The reader may become disoriented by the commentary's structure, especially if consulting it on only one specific pericope, but careful attention to the table of contents and to the difference between major and minor subheadings should minimize this difficulty. The charts on pp. 151 (Solomon) and 226 (Elijah) are helpful, as are the frequent outlines of proposed chiasmic and concentric structures. The two sections of 1 Kings that report royal reigns in a brisk formulaic format (14:21-16:34 and 22:41-53) fall outside this four-character schema and must receive comment outside the overall system. Moreover, the Ahijah oracle of chapter 11 must do double duty, being important to the stories of both Solomon and Jeroboam. Structural inconsistencies are inevitable in a book as complex as 1 Kings, but one is justified in wondering whether the four-character pattern has been artificially imposed and whether the shape of 2 Kings should not play a larger role in a reader's perception of 1 Kings.

The exposition is clear. The conclusions are usually believable and argued convincingly. The author handles his methodology with skill. Most of the proposed organizing structures (inclusions, concentric symmetries, chiasmic symmetries) are convincing, although a few seem forced (p. 373), the simple result of the natural order of consecutive story telling (pp. 182-83, 371), or unpersuasive for other reasons (pp. 174-75, 342). The attempt to trace the motifs of eating and not eating throughout chapters 20-21 (pp. 338-41) is not as believable as the rest of the author's readings. The exposition evidences no theological biases or ideological concerns that do not grow out of the text itself, and would suit a Jewish, Christian, or secular audience equally well. The central ideological focus is the character of Yahweh, who requires obedience from both kings and prophets as a god who is concerned for his own supremacy and the loyalty of his people.

Overall this is a well-crafted and highly serviceable commentary. However, one must question the editorial wisdom of commissioning a literary (as opposed to a historical critical) commentary on 1 Kings in isolation, when this book bonds so tightly to 2 Kings in literary shape and ideological outlook, to say nothing of the two books' historical unity in the Hebrew canon. A literary reading of 1 Kings alone turns out to be something quite different from a literary reading of 1 Kings with 2 Kings in view. (5/97)