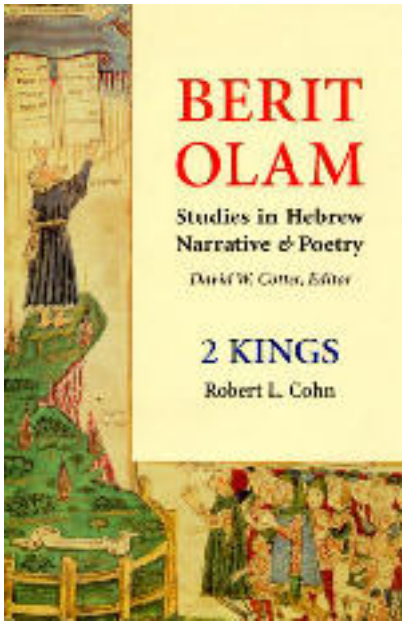


RBL 01/2005



Cohn, Robert L.

2 Kings

Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry

Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000. Pp. xvi +186. Cloth. \$34.95. ISBN 0814650546.

W. Boyd Barrick
Montana State University-Billings
Billings, MT 509101

The dust jacket of this compact volume identifies the intent of the Berit Olam (“Everlasting Covenant”) commentary series: to bring “to all interested in the Bible, be they lay people, professional biblical scholars, students, or religious educators, the latest developments in the literary analysis of these ancient texts.” Consequently, “the readings of the books of the Hebrew Bible offered here all focus on the final form of the texts, approaching them as literary works, recognizing that the craft of poetry and storytelling that the ancient Hebrew world provided can be found in them and that their truth can be better appreciated with a fuller understanding of that art.” This is an admirable, needed, and difficult objective. The fellowship of “professional biblical scholars” has not always communicated effectively, or at all, with the Bible’s many other audiences, who, not surprisingly, often suspect us of much mischief (e.g., the derision that the Jesus Seminar elicits when featured in mainstream news magazines). Cohn’s reading of 2 Kings suits the series and largely meets its objectives; it is a worthy companion to Jerome T. Walsh’s excellent reading of 1 Kings (1996) in the same series (for a review of the latter work, see <http://bookreviews.org/bookdetail.asp?TitleId=2281&CodePage=2281,1685,3982,1419,1298>).

The decision to have different authors treat the two halves of what is a single literary work (so also in the Word Biblical Commentary series) is a mixed blessing. As Cohn says, 2 Kings “is a direct continuation of 1 Kings and is incomprehensible without it” (xi). He apparently assumes the reader’s familiarity with what has gone before, since he spends little space in recapitulation unless it is essential in the storyline or literary structure (e.g., Josiah’s desecration of the sanctuary at Bethel [2 Kgs 23:15–20] requires a brief recapitulation of 1 Kgs 13 to demonstrate that the “trajectory of expectation opened at the very beginning of the divided kingdom and arching over its history ever since here culminates in Josiah’s action” [159]). Cohn makes a case for the separate treatment of 2 Kings, and it is helpful to have the different (albeit similar) perspectives of two professional readers of this material. However, our appreciation for the macrostructure—how the individual pieces of the puzzle fit together into the “big picture”—suffers a bit by this dual approach. This same editorial decision was made for 1 and 2 Samuel and for Jeremiah/Lamentations in the Berit Olam series, but not for 1 and 2 Chronicles.

Cohn stakes out the nature of his “literary perspective” in a brief introductory chapter (xi–xvi):

[W]hile historical scholarship has revealed seams in the narrative that betray antecedent written or oral texts, I present a continuous reading of the narrative that tries to appreciate the literary choices made in its composition. . . . By paying close attention to the way in which a writer has constructed a narrative world, we can see more clearly its historical, ideological, and esthetic dimensions. (xii–xiii)

He begins by surveying the literary landscape of this “narrative world.” In Cohn’s reading 2 Kings consists of four interlocking units, and his book is structured accordingly: (1) “The Story of Elisha” (2 Kgs 1:1–8:6; chs. 1–11 [pp. 3–56]); (2) “Revolutions in Aram, Israel and Judah” (2 Kgs 8:7–13:25; chs. 12–18 [pp. 59–95]); (3) “Turmoil and Tragedy for Israel” (2 Kgs 14–17; chs. 19–23 [pp. 99–122]); and (4) “Renewal and Catastrophe for Judah” (2 Kgs 18–25; chs. 24–30 [pp. 125–73]). Structural and thematic red threads running through all four units, and 1 Kings as well, include the alternation of northern and southern reigns, divine control of history exemplified in the prophecy-and-fulfillment schema, the covenantal expectations for the two kingdoms that are ultimately unmet, and the appeal to divine mercy, which is the basis for hope in the future. The commentary unrolls treating the segments of each unit in sequence, giving greater attention to the parts (microstructures) than to the wholes.

This book is meant to be an aid to readers of an English version of the Hebrew Bible and to be read alongside it. Toward this end, the commentary on most of the longer segments is keyed to a structural outline of that episode. This is a tremendous asset, particularly for

casual Bible readers and students finding their way through this labyrinth of strange-sounding names and superabundant detail. Unaccountably, however, no such road map accompanies the commentary on some segments in the second half of 2 Kings, especially the complicated representations of the reigns of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18–20; chs. 24–27 [pp. 125–45]) and of Josiah (2 Kgs 22:1–23:20; ch. 29 [pp. 151–62]); this omission is most surprising and regrettable in the case of Josiah, whose reign is acknowledged as “the culmination of 2 Kings, in fact of the entire volume of 1–2 Kings” (151). There are many structural outlines of the Josiah segment to choose from (see, e.g., H.-D. Hoffmann, *Reform und Reformen: Untersuchungen zu einem Grundthema der deuteronomistischen Geschichtsschreibung* [ATANT 66; Zurich: Theologische, 1980], 219; L. Eslinger, “Josiah and the Torah Book: Comparison of 2 Kgs 22:1–23:28 and 2 Chr. 34:1–35:19,” *HAR* 10 [1985]: 37–62 [esp. 39–47]; N. Lohfink, “The Cult Reform of Josiah of Judah: 2 Kings 23:22–23 as a Source for the History of Israelite Religion,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* [ed. P. D. Miller et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987], 461; B. O. Long, *2 Kings* [FOTL 10; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 272–77; D. J. Wiseman, *1–2 Kings: Introduction and Commentary* [TOTC 9; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993], 293–305; and E. Eynikel, *The Reform of King Josiah and the Composition of the Deuteronomistic History* [OTS 33; Leiden/: Brill, 1996], ch. 3 [esp. pp. 149–55]), the variety belying the subjectivity of the analyses that produced them; this caveat applies to Cohn’s analyses as well.

Cohn affirms at the outset that “[t]he aim of a literary commentary is not the sources, but the discourse” (xii). He delivers with interesting, often insightful, and invariably useful comments, often pointing out meaningful word order and assonance in the Hebrew original. Footnotes are minimal, and his “Suggestions for Further Reading” consist of fifteen well-chosen items (174–75). His own discourse is engaging and reader-friendly, with some delicious turns of phrase (e.g., Jezebel “paints, pretties, and peers” from her window in 9:30 [69]; the king of Aram “huffs and puffs” in 6:11–14: [45]; Ahab’s seventy doomed descendants constitute gristly “a full house” in 10:1 [71]). Each of the target readerships identified on the dust jacket will find Cohn’s book a helpful and comfortable guide through 2 Kings. A less expensive paperback would be an excellent textbook—I am borrowing liberally from Cohn in preparing an undergraduate “Bible as Literature” course to be offered later this year.