



**Johanna W. H. Van Wijk-Bos**

***The Land and Its Kings: 1–2 Kings***

A People and a Land

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020. Pp. xiv + 338. Paper.  
\$29.99. ISBN 9780802877451.

Walter A. Maier III  
Concordia Theological Seminary

This is the third and final volume of *A People and a Land*, a multivolume work on the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Johanna van Wijk-Bos writes as a seasoned theologian, having taught as professor of Old Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary from 1977 to 2017. She currently serves the Presbyterian Church (USA) as an ordained pastor.

Van Wijk-Bos engages in this study of 1 and 2 Kings (hereafter Kings) “with deep commitments to feminism and issues of gender and to analysis of patriarchal structures and ideologies” (x). Special attention is paid to “women’s voices and the roles they play in the various accounts” (x). Van Wijk-Bos takes the position that Kings is a postexilic work, with “the final shaping of the text to have taken place in the period of Judah’s restoration, perhaps the fifth century BCE” (8). She assumes a twofold purpose for Kings: to present a postexilic perspective on the history of the Israelites and their land and to provide insight for the postexilic community from a review of the past (8).

Van Wijk-Bos divides the text of Kings into six cycles. The first cycle, “A New Day Dawns,” consists of 1 Kgs 1–11, which goes from the end of David’s rule and life through the reign of Solomon. The second cycle, “The Beginning of the End” (1 Kgs 12–16), recounts the division of the kingdom shortly after the death of Solomon and continues to an initial report concerning the reign of Ahab. The third cycle, “The Struggle for Life” (1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 8:6), proceeds from Elijah’s first recorded

encounter with Ahab through the return of the Shunammite woman to Judah and the restoration of her property. The dominant figures in this cycle are Elijah and Elisha. The fourth cycle, “The Tumult of War” (2 Kgs 8:7–13:25), gives information about turmoil involving Aram, Israel, and Judah. Key aspects of this cycle are the rebellion of Jehu, the reigns of Athaliah in Judah and that of her grandson Joash, and the death of Elisha. Cycle 5, “The Road to Collapse” (2 Kgs 14–17), after dealing with kings in Israel and Judah, concludes with a report concerning the termination of the Northern Kingdom and a rationale as to why this happened. Finally, the sixth cycle (2 Kgs 18–25) depicts the last years of Judah’s existence as a kingdom and how this kingdom was ended by the Babylonians. Major characters in this cycle are Hezekiah and Josiah.

The cycles in turn are divided into acts and the acts into scenes. At the beginning of each of these units van Wijk-Bos provides a short quotation from the secondary literature (usually another commentary on Kings) that succinctly captures the essence of that unit. At the beginning of each act, there is a helpful summary of the verses that will be covered. Throughout her commentary van Wijk-Bos gives her own translation of selected verses from Kings. These are set on the page as inserts, in “short, so-called metric lines, giving the appearance of poetry” (xi). She uses these short lines to “emphasize the structure of a unit, reveal the parts that create the whole and emphasize key words that serve the interpretation of a passage” (xi–xii).

I enjoyed reading this commentary, even where I had a different interpretation of a passage than. The critique that follows has three parts: how the commentary benefited me, how it in parts needed more exposition or analysis, and points of disagreement with van Wijk-Bos.

As for the beneficial aspect, van Wijk-Bos throughout the commentary handles Kings in a most capable manner, frequently having keen insights into the text. Three examples will have to suffice. First are the conclusions she reaches after dealing with the brief reign of Ahaziah (son of Ahab), who died as a result of injuries suffered in an accidental fall (2 Kgs 1:2–17). She astutely notes that the central theme of the Ahaziah episode is the struggle between life and death: Will the king live or die (167)? Van Wijk-Bos then appropriately applies this same theme to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah: Will they live or die? That is the fundamental question in Kings: “Will they, in their desire to live, appeal to the right source of life for their well-being and continued existence?” (167). Another good observation is that the motif of Ahaziah *going up* (to his bed) and *not coming down* (from it) anticipates the manner of Elijah leaving this earth in the next chapter of Kings (167). Second, I also appreciated van Wijk-Bos’s explanation as to why Jezebel painted her eyes and arranged her hair as Jehu approached Jezreel (2 Kgs 9:30). This was not to make herself attractive to the rebel “but because a person’s appearance, a woman’s appearance, makes her feel more powerful even if she has lost all the power she ever had, as in Jezebel’s case” (222). The third example of how I benefited from the commentary was in reading van Wijk-Bos’s excellent excursus on Elijah and Elisha, in which she characterizes the two prophets and compares them and the narratives about them (236–40).

Regarding the need for more treatment, perhaps van Wijk-Bos was limited as to how much she could write by the format and intention of the series. Aware of this possibility, I nevertheless still wish, for example, that she had interacted more with the Hebrew text. When she does carry out such analysis, her notes show her expertise with Hebrew and lead readers to a fuller understanding of the message of a passage. Or, when dealing with the episode in which Elijah wishes to die (1 Kgs 19:4), van Wijk-Bos writes that this “desire to die may not be so much a suicidal wish as the articulation of a general giving up, a sinking of the spirit to a point at which it loses the will to go on” (135). I agree with this, but why did the previously courageous Elijah, who had been zealous for Yahweh, give up, or why did his spirit sink to such a low point? Jezebel had threatened his life (1 Kgs 19:2), but Jezebel prior to this had been a threat to Elijah, so more needs to be said. One would like to see further explanation from van Wijk-Bos. Or, for example, what about the lying spirit who is included in the vision Micaiah sees of God and the host of heaven (1 Kgs 22:19–23)? Van Wijk-Bos mentions this spirit (158, 159), but does not take up the questions concerning who the spirit might be, why this lying spirit appears with the holy God and the host of heaven, and whether or not there is a moral issue with God sending the spirit to *deceive* (Ahab).

Following is a brief sampling of points of disagreement with van Wijk-Bos. First, she goes along with the majority opinion that in 1 Kgs 13:4–5 the altar of Jeroboam I splits and the ashes on it pour out right after Jeroboam stretches forth his hand against the prophet of God (94). However, the argument can be made that 1 Kgs 13:3 and 5 are parenthetical comments by the author(s) of the passage (see, e.g., Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings*, Berit Olam [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996], 176, 178–79) who is/are telling his/their contemporary readership that, by their time (centuries after the reign of Jeroboam I), the prophecy had been fulfilled. Also, note 1 Kgs 13:32. The fulfillment actually took place during the reform of Josiah (2 Kgs 23:15–16). Walsh (*1 Kings*, 179) gives one explanation: “the narrative of the prophecy was composed after its fulfillment had taken place.”

Also, van Wijk-Bos takes the position (184-91) that Elisha was the biological father of the Shunammite woman’s son (2 Kgs 4:8-37). While van Wijk-Bos sets forth her reasoning in clear fashion, in the end I was not convinced. In describing the reform of Josiah, when the king circa 622 BCE moved to the north to include the altar at Bethel and the cultic place located there (2 Kgs 23:15), van Wijk-Bos comments, “It is highly unlikely that this activity could have taken place as told in a region that at this time was an Assyrian province” (291). However, after the death of Assurbanipal circa 627 BCE Assyrian power rapidly declined and the extent of Assyrian rule was receding, so that Josiah could have carried on activity in what *had been* an Assyrian province.

Lest the wrong impression be given, let me state explicitly that I without hesitation recommend van Wijk-Bos’s commentary for those working with Kings, and I thank her for her important contribution to this field of studies. I plan to consult her volume regularly and make citations from it as I write my own commentary on 2 Kings.