

LEARNING TO SEE THE COLOURS OF THE PAST.  
2 KGS 23:30–25 IN THE HISTORY OF LATIN INTERPRETATION  
FROM ITS BEGINNINGS TO THE EVE OF THE REFORMATION

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**ABSTRACT** This article aims to check on the history of interpretation of Kings as a pre-study for the VTP-Commentary Series. Because Kings has rarely any commentaries in Late Antiquity here, the Latin tradition's history of interpretation up to the Eve of Reformation will be looked at. The example is 2 Kgs 23:30–25:30 and the questions are: what lines or details of interpretation are there? Which is the role of Vulgate as an (interpreting) translation in it?

**KEYWORDS** 2 Kgs 23–25; History of Interpretation; Auslegungsgeschichte; Vulgate; Middle Ages; Late Antiquity.

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG** Die Bücher der Könige werden in der christlichen Spätantike verhältnismäßig wenig rezipiert. Anliegen dieser kleinen Vorstudie ist es, anhand des Beispiels von 2 Kön 23,30–25,30 in der lateinischen Tradition bis zur Reformation zu testen, welche Auslegungen dominant wurden, was es an Sinnpotenzialen der Bibel zu heben gibt und welche Rolle die Vulgata als interpretierende Übersetzung dabei spielen kann.

**SCHLAGWORTE** 2 Kön 23–25; Interpretationsgeschichte; Auslegungsgeschichte; Vulgata; Mittelalter; Spätantike.

### *1. Introduction*

The books of history do not enjoy too much popularity regarding the interpretation in the so-called pre-modern era. Judaism lives in dispersion and thus without state and monarchy, whilst in Christianity probably above all the missing messianic or future-oriented moments are decisive, for without this the possibilities of Christological interpretation are drastically limited (exceptions are, for example, 2 Sam 7, David and Solomon as people, 1 Kgs 6-8; 19:10-14; 2 Kgs 22f.; 25:27-30). This thesis cannot be proven in such short study, rather it is meant to be a sample and preliminary study for a more comprehensive commentary<sup>2</sup>.

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2. Vetus Testamentum Patristicum to 1.2 Sam; 1.2 Kgs; 1.2 Chr.

In the following, we will only deal with the aspect of the Latin interpretation of 2 Kgs 24f. (= 4 Reg 24f.). The history of the interpretation of the last four kings after the death of ‘David redivivus’ Josiah has developed a relatively broad history of impact, as it forms the conclusion of a longer narrative context.

Usually, research focuses on the interpretation of texts in late antiquity and then breaks off because, for example, the text-critical variants become less interesting, the material increases, or the research discourses went in other directions. The history of interpretation, on the other hand, is decidedly interested in discontinuities, discourses and lines of tradition or fragments of the history of reception or the *intentiones lectores*. It is also of interest how interpretations and discourses shift, for example, with kingship in the Middle Ages, the Reformation or the Enlightenment.

This article will only deal with the period up to the Reformation, as from then on, the sources become confusing. The focus lies also on the medium of biblical interpretation, since liturgical texts such as the Queen’s Coronation, art objects such as the German imperial crown, the Verdun Altar in the kings monastical residence Klosterneuburg (near Vienna) or sacred buildings, such as the “gallery of Kings” on the Western Wall of Notre Dame de Paris would spend far beyond the scope of this article. For the sake of clarity, the Latin writers up to the 8<sup>th</sup> century are treated first, followed in a second chapter by important examples from the Carolingian period up to the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. The aim is, on the one hand, to gain an overview and, on the other, to identify initial lines or patterns that can be verified or falsified in the context of the larger project.

## 2. Latin Church Fathers

In the early Latin Church Fathers, there are a few mentions of 2 Kings 24f. Probably, there was considerably more material in the fifth century, yet merely some fragments have been preserved<sup>3</sup>. The cause of the brief increase in interest in the history books could be the threat and sacking of Rome by the Vandals in 410 CE; however, the fragments do not allow any firm conclusion.

In the interpretation of the Lord’s Prayer by *Cyprian of Carthage* (200-258), the verse “And lead us not into temptation” (no. 25) is interpreted in terms of 2 Kgs 24:1-3, namely that God allows evil (*malum*) to come in as punishment. This passage is unambiguous for Cyprian and in his opinion, we understand it

3. See Ancient Christian Commentary Series [=ACCS], pref. xxi.

correctly from the literal sense. He generalises here the short remark against King Jehoiakim of Judah who sheds innocent blood and for this reason, according to the text, has to face raids by bands of robbers.

In his apologetic work *Praeparatio evangelica*, the church historian *Eusebius of Caesarea*<sup>4</sup> (264-339) refers to the Jewish-Hellenistic historians and, in continuity with them, provided few descriptions of the Books of Kings, which, however, are rather renarrations<sup>5</sup>.

For his religious community, *Cassian* (†298) wrote a number of moral occasional writings, among which the *Collationes* have a prominent position. On the subject of boasting, he uses the passage on Jehoiachin (2 Kgs 24:8-16) as a sample text. He compares Jehoiachin's exile to Babylon with Jehoahaz's exile to Egypt (2 Kgs 23:30-34) and concludes: 'Both are lands of boasting and whoever once has fallen into them cannot turn back and must die in a foreign land, i.e. far from God's<sup>6</sup>.

Three of the four great Latin Fathers also deal with the end of the Book of Kings. *Ambrose of Milan* (339-397) makes an appeal to the rulers in *de officiis* X, 64. He opposes the accumulation of gold treasures, e.g. from tax revenues, as long as there are poor people who have to starve. He underlines his appeal with an anti-Judaic point: those who hoard their money are like the priests at the temple of Jerusalem who had to watch the pagan and wicked Nebuchadnezzar carry away their gold (2 Kgs 24:13-16). He ends with the pointed remark that it is better to invest in "living vessels" than in "golden ones". This shows once more the influence Ambrose had on the ruler, who after all had the altar of Victoria removed and was able to condemn a massacre.

Ambrose's disciple *Augustine* (354-420) occasionally refers to the history books in his extensive works, especially in *de civitate Dei* and *de diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum*. However, precise statements are not possible here for two reasons: Firstly, there are no clear allusions, and secondly, his argu-

4. Eupolemos, Philo the Elder, but above all Josephus are to be mentioned (AJ X, 81-148) here. Important changes compared to MT are apologetic euphemisms in the royal scheme and the representations, which culminate in the glorification of Jehoiachin (AJ X, 98). Finally, there is a chronological insertion in AJ X, 143-148, which calculates the time until the exile, yet the pardon of Jehoiachin (2 Kings 25:27-30) is omitted and Josephus continues immediately with Cyrus and Daniel – similar to the end of 2 Chr 36.

5. In his History of the Church, Eusebius plays twice with the destruction of the Second Temple, but there are no references to the Salomonic Temple (see Eusebius, *histor. eccl.* II, 6; III, 5).

6. Cassian, *Coll.* 57, 193.

mentation varies with the audience<sup>7</sup>, so that an interpretation in the right sense takes a back seat to the persuasive interest of the rhetorician.

Augustine's contemporary and the most famous exegete among the Latin Church Fathers is undoubtedly *Jerome* (347-420). Unfortunately, most of his commentaries on the history books are no longer extant, including the commentary on 1-4 Reg. The Book of Names and the *Vulgate* thus remain as sources, whereby the *Vulgate* only permits an indirect interpretation. Exemplary conspicuous features are:

Names: The replacement of the Arameans by the Syrians in 2 Kgs 24:2 is tantamount to an update. The spelling of the names of persons and places is also predominantly latinised. It is noticeable, that Jerome sticks to the Hebrew text and does not read the kings Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin as one, as the OG and the Greek writers, who followed it, do<sup>8</sup>. The translation of the *terminus technicus* 'people-of-the-land', which is inconsistent in other places<sup>9</sup>, is always rendered here by Jerome as *populus terrae* (24:15; 25:3).

Times: Contrary to all other evidence, he states the reign of Jehoiachin not as being three months, but 18 years (24:8), without further explanation. At the same time, the siege of Jerusalem is moved to the eighth year (24:12), although according to 2 Kgs 24, this had already begun around the time of Jehoiakim's death.

Theology: In 2 Kgs 24f. there is almost no mention of God, the most important being in 2 Kgs 24:1-3, where the coming judgment is connected with Manasseh and Jehoiakim. Jerome here twice explicates a statement of God by inserting *verbum Domini*, thus replacing existing other verbs. On the one hand, the passage reads like a prophetic quotation of fulfilment, on the other hand, some expressions are reminiscent of Credo formulas, e.g. "[...] *factum est*" "*quod locutus erat [...]* PROPHETAS", so that possible allusions to the Christological, but above all the Holy Spirit verse, cannot be ruled out. Intended, they could allude to Jesus as the "Word of God" who becomes flesh through the collaboration of the Holy Spirit. This in turn would allow a reference to King Jehoiachin as typos of Christ, for example, in the family tree of Matt 1. Since the commentary is lost, however, this consideration must remain speculative.

7. See ACCS, xiii.

8. See Collinet, Benedikt J.: „3.-4. Königtümer“, in: Meiser, Martin/ Wilk, Florian (eds.): *Die Wirkungs- und Rezeptionsgeschichte der Septuaginta* (Handbuch zur Septuaginta 6), Gütersloh 2022, 223-227.

9. See e.g. 2 Kgs 11, to which another publication is forthcoming.

The transition between the time of the Fathers and the early Middle Ages is marked by *Isidore of Seville* (560-636). In his *Quaestiones in Vetus Testamentum* he devotes himself mainly to literal questions, so that no new theological thoughts can be found; textually he largely follows Jerome.

### 3. From the Karolingian Time to the Late Middle Ages

While in the East the time of the Church Fathers lasted until the ninth century, a new epoch in the history of interpretation had already begun with the Carolingians at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century<sup>10</sup>. The preservation and transmission of previous interpretations and their updating to medieval kingship now became important<sup>11</sup>. An example of this are the writings of *Claudius of Turin* (780-827), who endeavoured to compile a collection of quotations from the Fathers' commentaries on the history books. The "church father" of the English tradition and author of the first English church history and the most important summation commentary on the Song of Songs, the *Venerable Bede* (672-735), established two works in which he refers to the Book of Kings – yet unfortunately not to its end<sup>12</sup>.

*Hrabanus Maurus* (780-856) wrote a commentary, which was completed and edited post mortem by his pupil and copyist *Walafridus Strabo*. The *Expositiones in libros regum*<sup>13</sup>, like the works of Claudius and Bede, are summary and therefore do not bring any new aspects to the end of the Books of Kings regarding the history of interpretation. Nevertheless, they do show that the interpretation of the Church Fathers stayed relevant.

The commentaries on Kings of the tenth and eleventh centuries are strongly oriented towards Isidore of Seville and *Pseudo-Hieronymus* (9<sup>th</sup> century), so that the important *Glossa Biblicarum* (Albert of Siegburg) and the *Glossa in Regum*

10. See e.g. Collinet, Benedikt J.: The Motif of Ordered Love (Caritas Ordinata) in Song of Songs 2:4b. Reflections on its History of Interpretation, in: Schellenberg, Annette/ Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger (eds.): Interpreting the Song of Songs – Literal or Allegorical? (BTS 26), Leuven 2016, 131-161.

11. See Andreae de Sancto Victore, *Expos. hyst.*, intr. xiv-xvi.

12. *In Regum librum triginta quaestiones und de Templo* (see further Berarducci, Silvia C., *Hrabani Mauri opera Exegetica. Repertorium Fontium I. Rabano Mauro Esegeta le fonti i commentari* [IPM 38], Turnhout 2006, 291).

13. Berarducci, *Hrabani Mauri*, 291. This commentary is a scheme for Angelomus of Luxeuil (†855), who planned to focus on the spiritual sense of the Books of Kings, but then saw it was too much work and decided to refocus (see Andreae de Sancto Victore, *Expos. hyst.*, intr. xvi).

(Gilbert the Universal) remain strongly oriented towards the wording of the biblical text<sup>14</sup>.

The next important commentary is found in 12<sup>th</sup> century France in the School of St. Victor. *Andrew of Wigmore*<sup>15</sup> (†1175) turned away early on from the biblical approach of his teachers and colleagues Hugh (1097-1141) and Richard of St. Victor (1110-1173), whose mystical interests left them without an eye for the historical-literary interpretation of the Bible which he preferred<sup>16</sup>. Although we know little about him, his commentaries on the Hexateuch and the Books of Kings can be dated to the early phase before 1147<sup>17</sup>. As sources for his *Expositio hystorica in librum regum*<sup>18</sup>, he not only draws on Christian writers such as *Pseudo-Hieronymus*<sup>19</sup> (9<sup>th</sup> century) and the *Glossa Ordinaria* (12<sup>th</sup> century), but also on Jewish works such as the *Midrash Rabbah* or the AJ of Josephus<sup>20</sup>. In this way, Jewish-Christian strands of interpretation briefly come together, albeit under clearly Christian auspices.

On the end of the Book of Kings, Andrew argues based on two passages (2 Kgs 23:33; 25:6) that the punishments imposed in each case were justified as the protagonists had turned against God or the king<sup>21</sup>. Also interesting is the question, which is open to him, what function the *trulla* (2 Kgs 25:14<sup>Vg</sup>) could have had exactly in the context of the temple, especially since they are made of gold. The Hebrew word at this point is a *hapax legomenon*, so that even today there is no common sense.

In scholasticism, the approach to literal interpretation is intensified, although the Bible served more as a collection of quotations and the interest in (precise)

14. See Andreae de Sancto Victore, *Expos. hyst.*, intr. xvii. Gilbert's *Glossa* might be the not well-known 'Vorlage' of *Glossa Ordinaria* and is generally dated around 1170 (see *ibid.* xvii).

15. Andreae de Sancto Victore, *Expos. hyst.*, intr. xiii-xiv.

16. Sæbo, Magne (ed.), *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The History of its Interpretation. Vol. I From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages. Part 2 The Middle Ages*, Göttingen 2000 (=HBOT I/2), 476. For him the historical meaning in *littera – sensus – sententia* is to prefer over the spiritual sense, because for him it is not sufficient to look behind the words (*verba*), yet one needs to understand the thing (*res*) first. For him, he allegories are too far from the original meaning, as they lose the connection to the *verbum*. (*ibid.* 483).

17. *Ibid.* 479.

18. Andreae de Sancto Victore, *Expos. hyst.*

19. This was important to him for two reasons: He considered it authentic, so that he believed himself to be in possession of a strong authority, and the interpretation is one of the few Latin exegeses *ad litteram* that had existed so far. (see Andreae de Sancto Victore, *Expos. hyst.*, intr. xv).

20. See Andreae de Sancto Victore, *Expos. hyst.*, intr. xxiii; xxix-xxxvii; HBOT I/2, 480.

21. Andreae de Sancto Victore, *Expos. Hyst.* 117.

interpretation receded into the background. A prominent example is *Thomas Aquinas* (1225-1274), who wrote about the omission of Jehoahaz and Jehoiahin in a treatise: “*sacra Scriptura non curat minutias*”<sup>22</sup> (“sacred Scripture is not about the details”). This statement is difficult, for it relativizes the value of individual statements in favour of a metaphysical-universalist theology.

From the end of the thirteenth century to the time of the Reformation, further commentaries, sums, and a strengthening of interpretations in the wording appear. As an example, we can only refer to *Nicholas of Lyra* (1270-1349), who we know today as one of the masterminds of *Martin Luther*, who thus had a significant indirect influence on Protestant exegesis<sup>23</sup>. These commentaries, like those of the Carolingian period, collect existing material but propose little that is new.

#### 4. Conclusion

A review of the history of Latin interpretation has shown that the end of the Books of Kings and thus the entry into Babylonian exile are of secondary importance for these authors. If we look at those writers who refer to it broadly, the majority of those who make an interpretation show a proximity to rulers (Ambrose and Augustine in Milan, Jerome in Rome, Andrew of Wigmore near Paris). They interpret 2 Kgs 23-25 partly tropologically, but the addressees vary greatly.

The second group are the historians and collectors. They reproduce the contents of the books, receive and compile the already existing interpretations and add occasional formal comments.

Of particular interest for a theological interpretation seems to be the passage 2 Kgs 24:1-3, which speaks of God and briefly explains the punishment. This is a deviation from both the entire Jewish tradition and the modern Christian exegesis, which focus their attention on these chapters on 2 Kgs 25:27-30 and ask whether the pardon of Jehoiahin is a historically mentioned fact or a message of hope for the people in exile – reaching as far as messianism<sup>24</sup>.

For an edition of the Church Fathers, we learn a few things from these few observations. On the one hand, the short example shows that there have always

22. Thomas von Aquin, *Opera Omnia* XIX, 70a (cit. after HBOT I/2, 546).

23. <http://digital.ub.uni-duesseldorf.de/ink/content/pageview/2293715> (accessed last on 16<sup>th</sup> Aug. 2022) p. 837-840. Well known in relation to Luther is the bon mot: *Si Lyra non lyrasset, Lutherus non saltasset* („Hätte Lyra nicht geleiert, so hätte Luther nicht getanzt“).

24. See *Die letzten Könige von Juda. Eine narratologische und intertextuelle Analyse von 2 Kön 23,30–25,30* (BBB 188), Göttingen 2019, 32-46; engl. translation „Whom to blame for Judah’s doom?“ (forthcoming).

been collection and selection movements in the history of interpretation. This suggests that certain interpretations, e.g. those of Jerome or Augustine, which have survived virtually all collection movements, have had a privileged place in interpretation. In part, they still shape commentaries today and can sometimes obscure the view of further contributions to the discourse. Therefore, it is important to invest time in prior research in edition so as not to overlook other and original interpretations. In this way, the diversity of late antique interpretations in particular will become visible again.

Secondly, it is also important to take the theological, social and political discourses of the time into account, as they influenced the choice of texts and their interpretation and did or did not give them a “Sitz-im-Leben”. The theologians close to the rulers and later kings, tended to interpret more strongly here, whilst an allegorical and Christological interpretation is largely (or even entirely?) absent – as is the presence in everyday liturgical texts. This is interesting because especially in monasticism (the strongest group of exegetes), spiritual texts were much more popular, as for example the countless interpretations of the Song of Songs or the Psalms make clear – and thus not only writers but also certain biblical texts occupied a privileged place.

Important for future research on biblical interpretation is therefore a comprehensive examination of the sources, which must take into account not only text-critical and historical aspects of transmission, but also the abundance of commentaries, sermon literature and scattered quotations. The significance of the Vulgate in the West, for example, could be re-contextualised and re-evaluated both in its “Überlieferungsgeschichte” and its influence on systematic theology and magisterial texts. Therefore, it constitutes a bridge between the document of God’s revelation, the theological traditions of Christianity and Judaism, as well as recent questions of society and religion.