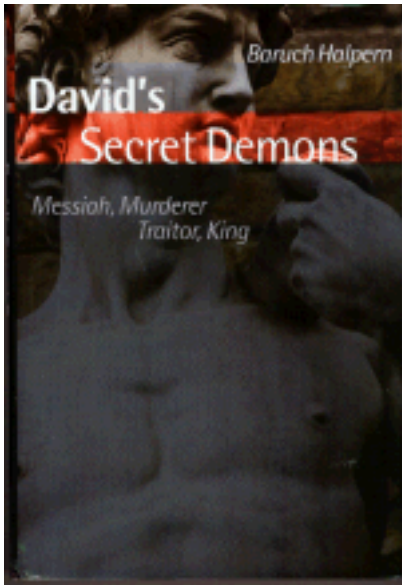


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Halpern, Baruch

David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001. Pp. xx + 492.
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Anticipation is everything. Opening Baruch Halpern's new book, I looked forward to learning about David's secret demons—or at least to reading “A Life of David,” which is the title of the last of the book's five sections. But this book is not about David's life, nor about his demons. With regard to the book's subtitle (which refers to David, not to the demons, as would seem appropriate grammatically), the book is indeed about David as king and as murderer (though Halpern convicts him of the murders that 2 Samuel clears him of and clears him of the one that everyone agrees he committed). There is nothing here about David as messiah, and, so far from being a traitor, the book establishes David's undying loyalty—albeit to King Achish of Gaza.

Here is how Halpern himself describes his intent in the book: “Our only direct information about David, in the books of Samuel, essentially presents him as a hero. The present book is therefore a glimpse of David as his enemies saw him. . . . Much of Samuel goes to defend David against his enemies' picture of him, for Samuel was written for David's successor, Solomon, and transmitted by the kings of the dynasty he founded” (xv). “In this book, the reader will find, first, a summary of Solomon's presentation. Then comes a defense of the other side. . . . This leaves the matters of David's character and achievements ambiguous. However, it does have the merit of establishing his reality, his

historicity” (xvi). David was real—but he was not the David of Sunday-school-style biblical history.

In fact, Halpern’s interest is not in David’s life, but in a political and military history of tenth-century Israel. Indispensable to this retelling is an attempt to show that 2 Samuel provides us with authentic tenth-century historical information. Halpern’s argument that the book is essentially contemporaneous with the events it describes takes four forms. First, he insists that the political agenda behind 2 Samuel makes sense only in a tenth-century context. He even hints, if I interpret him correctly, that Bathsheba was responsible for writing, or at least commissioning, the book: “In the apology of Samuel, it is Bathsheba’s voice that we hear, though the hand be the hand of Solomon” (406). (Is this an attempt to provide an identity for Richard Elliott Friedman’s female J?) An anti-David/Solomon writer would have treated them as harshly as Saul was treated; a late legitimization of the dynasty would have made claims that were as grandiose as those of Chronicles. Second, he asserts that many elements within the story (extending to take in the description of Solomon’s reign in 1 Kings) fit with cultural patterns (the design of the temple; exotic animals as a feature of royal self-presentation) and linguistic phenomena (e.g., the names of Razon and Goliath) that could not be later than the tenth, or at the latest ninth, century. Third, 2 Samuel matches the archaeological patterns of Negev settlement, in the central Negev, not (as later) in the east. Finally, “the political coverage of the 9th century is meticulous in Kings. There was no discontinuity between the 10th century and the 9th century in the royal courts of Israel and Judah. It follows that the accounts of the 10th century should be reasonably trustworthy” (72).

But Halpern is a minimalist in maximalist’s clothing. The accurately preserved historical details that he finds in 2 Samuel permit him to reconstruct a radically different picture of tenth-century Israelite history than one finds, for example, in John Bright’s *History of Israel*: David was a life-long vassal of the Philistine King Achish of Gath. This posed no difficulty for him, because he was not an Israelite at all, but probably a Gibeonite. Absalom’s revolt proved so politically fruitful for David that one is tempted to suppose that he himself instigated it. He relied not on the indigenous militia but on a mercenary army for his power.

David’s professionals, in the end, were more than a counterweight to the forces ranged against him. The tribes of Israel remained independent until the Ammonite war [which occurred later in David’s reign in than 2 Samuel makes it seem]. They fitfully developed ties to David thereafter, with elements here and there embracing his leadership. But as David extended his tentacles into their society, the Israelites grew nervous about the regime in Jerusalem. They lost their ability

to resist Jerusalem in the course of the revolt. . . . It was only after Absalom's revolt that David became the legitimate king of all Israel. (380)

Halpern's most extended, clearest, and (to my mind) strangest argument is that 2 Sam 8 is historically trustworthy because its source is an actual display inscription of David's—but that one's trust in the facts presented in that chapter must be tempered by the realization that it was precisely crafted with the intent to be literally true and yet deceive its readers, for all Near Eastern royal literature was written for a double audience: insiders, who would not have tolerated egregious falsification but who could analyze the text in detail; and the masses, who accepted the extreme “spin” placed on facts that were literally true, taking David for a great king instead of the minor warlord that he really was.

The kinds of suggestions—I almost wrote “allegations”—that Halpern makes deserve a better presentation, one that is less confusing and less confused. The breeziness and contemporaneity of his writerly voice (“Monica Lewinsky's abortion” makes an appearance on 403 n. 28) are merely the surface of a writing style that ill conceals the writer's preference for rhetoric over clarity of presentation and of thought. “David is almost, or perhaps more than, a Shakespearean character” (6); he evolves into a “therapon” (5). Samuel Clemens denies that David was in any danger in his fight against Goliath (13; apparently Halpern reads the battle between Hank Morgan and Sir Sagramour in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* as a piece of biblical exegesis). The ages of the kings of Judah do not provide a sample large enough to be statistically significant, but “it is worth addressing the issue in statistical terms” anyway (238). “No specific dates, and no specific order of events, can be fixed within David's reign,” but nonetheless the sequence “is highly suggestive.” (241). Halpern even suggests that readers may wish to skip over sections of twenty, thirty-four, and fifty-two pages—more than a fifth of the book—which are either off topic or employ “scholarly jargon” (though I noticed no more of it in this section than elsewhere). “The Aftermath of Absalom's Revolt” goes down as far as the 550s and King Nabonidus of Babylon. Some aftermath!

There is an odd quality about the book that I cannot think how to describe except to call it “rabbinic”—though Halpern is no friend of Orthodoxy; he refers to Israel's “interdiction on invasive analysis of ancient human remains” (actually the result of contemporary political pressure) as “medieval” (384). For example, Samuel almost always says “Philistines” instead of “the Philistines.” Halpern insists that this is meant to lure the reader into thinking that the Philistines as a whole were meant, when the writer really meant as few as two Philistines (144). (The reader who is familiar with rabbinic literature will recognize this method of counting immediately.) It is true that 1 and 2 Samuel

mention Philistines forty times and use the definite article only six of those times, but the rest of the Bible uses the definite article with “Philistines” only three times out of 107 occurrences—proportionately far less than Samuel! This is a feature of Biblical Hebrew, *not* the clever device of a deceptive propagandist.

This is characteristic of Halpern’s method, and epitomizes the book’s great flaw. As a reader of the Bible, Halpern is a wonderful archaeologist. He unearths particular sentences and phrases and piles mountains of interpretation on them, but he does not understand the books of Samuel as a piece of *writing*. The strength of *David’s Secret Demons*, and its weakness, can be seen in his treatment of the death of Uriah. I was startled by the realization that, as Halpern points out, it makes no practical sense to have him killed, if what David wanted was to conceal that he himself was the father of Bathsheba’s child. It does, however, make psychological sense, and even more, it makes story sense, and these are two senses that Halpern does not have. His *First Historians* demonstrated this, and the idiosyncratic qualities of that book are far more noticeable in this one.

Like its subject, Halpern’s book is fascinating and flawed. One might say that this book is to David’s reign what Mitchell Dahood’s Anchor Bible commentary is to the book of Psalms. It is full of suggestions that would radically change our understanding of tenth-century Israel—some of which may well be correct, but it is hard to judge which ones. In my judgment, the reader would do best to follow Halpern’s own example and, rather than taking *David’s Secret Demons* as a work of synthetic history, mine its text for suggestive nuggets that can then be followed up by careful investigation in other sources. For Halpern’s *History of Israel*, a book that he describes (164 n. 1) as “in progress,” let us hope that he finds a more insistent editor or, even better, a tough co-author who can insist that the arguments be presented more clearly and more powerfully.

In the end, right or wrong in particular details or even his overall picture, Halpern does convey a sense of the messiness of real history made by humans who were competing for power. Arthur C. Clarke once wrote, “The universe is not only stranger than we imagine, it is stranger than we *can* imagine.” Baruch Halpern has gone a long way toward imagining the essential strangeness (if only we understood it in depth) of tenth-century Israelite history. A real “life of David,” however—and *David’s Secret Demons* will make a wonderful title for it—remains to be written.