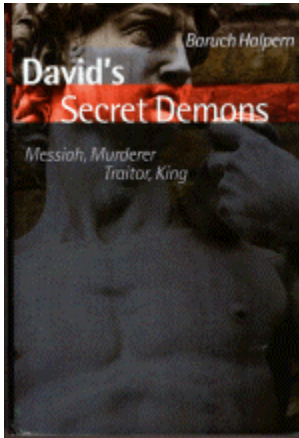


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Halpern, Baruch

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

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In *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King*, Baruch Halpern seeks to reestablish the historicity of the biblical King David and to reread the biblical account of David's life. He combines a variety of methodologies and evidence to provide us with his reading and evaluation of David. The David who appears is a complex figure, human and driven by *Realpolitik*.

The book is arranged into five parts and an appendix, comprising twenty-three chapters. Part 1 (chs. 1–2) discusses David in writing, giving a broad overview of David's life as it is portrayed in the Bible. Part 2 (chs. 3–4) seeks to determine a date for the writing of 2 Samuel and to provide a more thoroughgoing proof that the text is pro-David propaganda. Part 3 (chs. 5–12) comprises several chapters discussing the nature of historical writing; David's conquests of Moab, Aram, and the north Transjordan; the date of 2 Sam 8; and the historicity of the Davidic state. Part 4 (chs. 13–14) establishes a chronology of David's reign and the geography of his state. Part 5 (chs. 15–22) provides Halpern's detailed reconstruction of David's reign, welding textual, archaeological, and comparative evidence. Finally, Halpern provides an appendix (ch. 23), which discusses the archaeology of David's reign, including such topics as Halpern's interpretation of the

remains at Megiddo; reinterpretations of the dates of the six-chamber gates at Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer; and the dating of tenth-century strata.

For Halpern, the biblical account of David is propaganda “stemming from circles close to David and Solomon” (xiv). Therefore, reading it not as David’s friends saw him but as *David’s enemies saw him* is valuable for giving us a better understanding of the historical David. That is the focus of this book. According to Halpern, “the resulting picture is not a pretty one” (xv), but “the fact that the resulting picture produces a recognizably human David—not the brilliant literary creation in 1 and 2 Samuel, but a flesh-and-blood man—indicates that the portrait of David in the Bible was aimed at answering the accusations I attribute to his enemies here” (xv). In other words, Halpern concludes that this reading of David has much basis in history, although he admits that his reading of an anti-David is a proposal with no other evidence and is based in part on imagination (101). For Halpern, the David who appears under the whitewash of the biblical account is a more historically accurate David than the one who appears from a face-value reading of 1 and 2 Samuel.

Throughout the book Halpern takes the biblical accounts seriously as history because he believes that they were written for Solomon and transmitted by his successors, and Halpern uses a variety of arguments drawn from the text, archaeological evidence, and parallels with other ancient Near Eastern societies to back this up. Halpern’s goal is fruitful and is certain to provide a counterweight to the biblical portrayal of David.

While Halpern’s conclusion that the biblical portrait of David is propaganda meant to whitewash David to the world is not original to him, he certainly argues the case more consistently than others and ties the text to historical realia in the archaeological record more thoroughly than past studies. This alone makes the study refreshing and valuable. Furthermore, his presentation is fresh and original in many points. For instance, he concludes that David was probably guilty of every murder from which the Bible exonerates him but is, in fact, innocent of the one that it credits to him, namely, the murder of Uriah (94). He also suggests at one point that David may have been behind the revolt of Absalom as a way of further subjugating the northern area of Israel (380).

Because he believes that much of the biblical text is based on accounts written during the time of Solomon, Halpern accepts the majority of the text as historical. However, he is not a “fundamentalist” or necessarily a “maximalist,” nor is he slavishly tied to a naïve reading of the biblical text. He recognizes the presence of embellishment and outright invention (79) as well as a transference of other stories to David (8). He also concludes that the biblical text is not always given in the correct chronological sequence. For instance, David would have taken a census earlier in his reign than when the Bible places it (336–37); likewise, the persecution of the Saulides (2 Sam 21) most likely took place before the Absalom revolt (241). For interpretation of conquest accounts, he frequently employs what he calls “The Tiglath-Pileser Principle.” According to this principle, drawn from analysis of Assyrian inscriptions, conquest texts seek to imply maximum conquest without actually stating it (194). Thus, Halpern concludes that on many occasions the writer of the biblical text meant to imply that David conquered large areas but never actually states it, deliberately giving the reader a false impression of David’s greatness. To sum up, Halpern’s approach is a solid middle-of-the-road approach to the biblical text, in the tradition of W. F. Albright, A. Alt, and J. M. Miller. With this approach, this reviewer concurs. It is the approach of a historian.

My criticisms of the book concern two questions that the book leaves unanswered yet are vital to how we perceive the biblical account as history. First, throughout the book Halpern provides a multitude of arguments for concluding that much of the material now found in 1 and 2 Samuel was written close in time to the life of David, specifically during the reign of Solomon. He also includes arguments based on archaeological evidence. However, he leaves unanswered the question of whether or not the current state of archaeological evidence supports the notion that the time of David and Solomon was one during which monumental inscriptions, administrative texts, belles lettres, and so on were being produced in ancient Israel. At present, the answer is a resounding and definitive no. Of the small handful of “texts” found in excavations and coming from the tenth century, almost all are nothing more than names inscribed on potsherds, the most rudimentary form of writing. There is no archaeological evidence that the people in Israel at this time

were producing the sophisticated forms of writing that Halpern envisions formed the basis of the biblical account. This is a point at which the archaeological evidence deviates grossly from the picture of tenth-century B.C.E. Israel that Halpern wishes to portray.

Although many scholars have attempted to provide explanations for this lack of evidence for writing, including repeated references to the old adage “Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,” none are satisfactory. Written remains have been found at too many sites in ancient Palestine and from too many periods to support the conclusion that we simply have not yet found them for tenth-century Israel. In the end, historical reconstructions are supposed to be based on extant evidence, not evidence we hope exists but have not yet found or on evidence we assume exists because the Bible suggests that it should. Simply put, until this archaeological picture changes, there should be no talk about any types of sophisticated writing being produced during the time of David and Solomon, and we must take into consideration, in any reconstruction of David based on the Bible, that at least one hundred years passed before any events of his life were put into writing. While Halpern acknowledges that embellishment, invention, and such went into the writing of the history of David, he, in this reviewer’s opinion, is still overestimating its degree of historical accuracy. Although Halpern almost certainly is correct in his conclusion that 1 and 2 Samuel is preexilic, a date during or after the latter ninth century seems more likely and more in keeping with the archaeology.

Second, Halpern repeatedly uses an argument for historical proximity and accuracy based on what he concludes any writer could or could not have written about David based on the knowledge of his enemies. For instance, he concludes that the “alibis of Samuel” regarding David’s innocence of several murders could not have been written much after David’s day because the historical figures (Abner and so on) would have been forgotten and become devoid of “political resonance” (101). According to Halpern, we know this “by imagining the concerns of the audience that text addresses” (101). Which audience, though? A question Halpern does not answer is whether the propagandistic account of David found in the Bible was written to/for David’s friends or his enemies. That is, was it written to those who would be easily persuaded of David’s integrity and

innocence (his friends) or to those who would be persuaded only with great difficulty (his enemies)? Considering how thin the veneer of whitewash over David's character appears to be, it seems plausible to this reviewer that the text was written to David's friends, that is, to those who needed little convincing but were still aware of and troubled by criticisms of David. If this is the case, then the writer was at far more liberty to embellish and even invent details since his readers were already on his side.

As long as the Davidic dynasty existed, surely there were those who resisted and criticized it as well as those who defended it. Thus, many milieus in preexilic Judah could have provided the impetus for such pro-Davidic propaganda. For instance, one could easily postulate a late eighth-century or early seventh-century date. After the fall of the northern kingdom (721 B.C.E.), a large influx of northerners (Israelites) settled in Judah. These settlers would have known only a David shaped by two centuries of antagonism and might have been vocal toward the Judahites, criticizing both David and his progeny, bringing up their version of David's activities toward the Saulides and Solomon's "illegitimate" rule over Judah. A writer at this time could have generated 1 and 2 Samuel to answer the criticisms of the Israelites and settle the minds of the Judahites. This view is oversimplified but still serves to illustrate that other historical periods could have served as possible origin points for the production of pro-David propaganda.

Given the above two criticisms, therefore, it seems reasonable to be suspicious about the degree to which Halpern assigns early (and therefore historical) status to the biblical account of David. This is not to deny that the tale is history or was meant to be history or contains historical details. It is merely to suggest that the historian of David ought to err on the side of caution when using the Bible to reconstruct David's life.

These criticisms aside, however, one cannot discount the weight of evidence and erudition of the conclusions of Halpern's book. Many of his conclusions—that David fought with the Philistines, that he conquered Israel with the help of the Philistines, that he would not have been considered an Israelite by Israelites, that he broke with the Philistines only after conquering Israel, that Israel was not "willingly" part of his kingdom, that he was guilty of many of the murders the Bible tries to exonerate him

from, and that Solomon was a usurper—resonate with this reviewer and make sense. Halpern has given us a new standard for the twenty-first century, and this book will become the starting point for continuing scholarly discussion on the life of David. It is a new benchmark, and even those who are skeptical about the historicity of David and about the value of the biblical account of David must engage and refute Halpern's arguments in detail if they wish to be taken seriously in the discussion. The book is erudite, thorough, well-written, and a must read for anyone interested in David's life and the Bible's account of it.