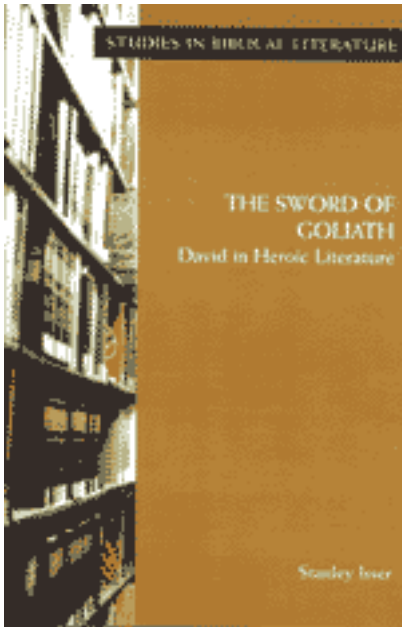


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**Isser, Stanley**

***The Sword of Goliath: David in Heroic Literature***

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Certain segments of biblical scholarship have recently become very interested in the figure of David and the Davidic dynasty. This interest particularly revolves around the historicity of David and the Davidic traditions. It is rather unfortunate that what should have been reasoned discussion of issues has sometimes devolved into acrimonious name-calling, with scholars on both sides of the debate guilty of talking past one another, apparently more interested in making controversial statements or staking a claim on the ideological turf than contributing anything of substance. This is not always the case, certainly, and both those who are convinced of David's historicity and those who doubt it in varying degrees have set forth cogent arguments within the limits of what they believe is reasonable to say based on given sets of criteria. In addition, the mainstream of biblical scholarship seems in this discussion, as in most others, to gravitate toward a mediating position. While extreme viewpoints will endure on both of sides of any given debate, the move toward consensus is an inexorable one, even if it is finally unattainable.

An excellent example of the mediating position of mainstream scholarship is Stanley Isser's recent offering, *Goliath's Sword: David in Heroic Literature*. Isser's work presents David as a hero akin to what one might find in other ancient literary creations like that of Homer. "The stories of David ... make sense," he writes, "not as

contemporary apology but as an organized collection of tales which have been edited and given propagandistic spin long after the time in which the actions they describe are set” (169). That the stories surrounding David were combined in the Deuteronomistic History very late in the history of Israel from well-known popular stories is the heart of Isser’s thesis.

Isser intentionally places himself in a mediating position between those who view the material in Samuel–1 Kgs 1 as an essentially accurate reconstruction of the events surrounding David’s rise to and maintenance of power and the alternative skeptic position that sees this literature as merely the reproduction of propagandistic material with little actual historical value. Neither of these extreme positions is satisfactory. On the one hand, materials such as the famous dynastic oracle in 2 Sam 7, and its apparent reflections in Pss 89 and 132, cannot be reasonably adduced as historical evidence, as their dates are difficult to determine. The so-called “minimalists” have, however, according to Isser, seized upon the difficulty of dating the Davidic traditions and lumped them all together as ahistorical royal propaganda. Isser suggests that the minimalists have taken skepticism too far. He recognizes that “[f]our hundred years passed between the time of David and the Babylonian exile” (2), and thus the literary traditions about David are in only very small ways connected with the historical figure. Nevertheless, “[it] must have taken more than official propaganda and prophetic poetry to make David such a compelling figure for so long a time. As in the case of miracle-working prophets like Elijah, old and long-lasting tales of the popular culture must have helped to shape David as a larger-than-life character, in this instance a prototypical king, in the imagination of many generations of Israelites” (2).

What makes Isser’s contribution to the debate unique is his suggestion that lying behind the biblical presentation of David is a cycle of popular, secular stories that had circulated through the collective memories of the Israelites for centuries before the written traditions coalesced around the mythological hero figure David. He writes: “The thesis of this book is that David was a legendary hero, kept alive in the oral and written folktales and poetry of Israel, who became a model of *arete* for the national culture, not unlike Achilles for Greeks and King Arthur for Britons. David appeared in this literature as a charismatic leader, the founder of a kingdom, and yet, also like Achilles and Arthur, a man with flaws and vulnerabilities” (2). He maintains that the remnants of these largely secular hero stories might be found in the texts that are mentioned throughout the Deuteronomistic History but are otherwise unknown, such as the Scroll of Yashar and the Book of the Wars of Yahweh (19 and passim).

After the introductory chapter in which he lays out his thesis, Isser devotes chapter 2 to a brief survey of historical approaches to the text of the Deuteronomistic History. The list

of names he cites is familiar to anyone knowledgeable of the issues: Rost, Albright, Halpern, Fohrer, McCarter, Mettinger, Noth, Cross, McKenzie, Person, Van Seters, Rosenberg, Lemche, Davies, Thompson, Dever, Jameson-Drake, and Na'aman. A collection of experts such as this from points all along the ideological spectrum would seem to be unmanageable, but Isser handles the issues and the somewhat acrimonious debate with a diffidence that is both fair and refreshing. Although Isser admits that "the approach taken here is closest to that of Van Seters" (22), he is fair to both the minimalists and the antiminimalists. He suggests that this is the appropriate term for the latter over against the tendentious and pejorative "maximalists, a term more appropriate for the old school of W. F. Albright" (20). In this he gives a worthy rejoinder to Philip Davies's comments on "The Sins of the Biblical Maximizers." Throughout his presentation, as I have indicated, Isser is attempting to tone down the more vituperative qualities of the debate while at the same time making a very cogent argument for a meaningful alternative to the two extremes. In this he is to be commended, for he is ensuring that his text will be most helpful in the continuing discussion of the issues.

I indicated above that the heart of Isser's thesis is that the Hebrew Bible's stories about David are essentially summary reproductions of much longer narratives of the heroic tradition. These longer narratives are visible, in part, in the ineluctable citations throughout the Deuteronomistic History. He devotes chapter 3 to a more complete elucidation of this idea. He begins by discussing the Scroll of Yashar, from which are cited a few bits of emotive poetry that the Deuteronomistic Historian puts into David's mouth. Isser says that although it "is presumptuous to draw any conclusions from such small fragments. . . , a hypothetical one might be that the Scroll of Yashar was a secular epic. . . , free not so much of references to divinity but of the theological framework and apologetics that characterize Dtr's prose account" (23). He further suggests on the same page that it "was composed at the earliest during the tenth century and at the latest before the exile." A question I would voice at this point concerns the relative chronology of the completion of the Scroll of Yashar and the citations of it in the Deuteronomistic History. Should one assume that Yashar was complete—or even written at all—when the Deuteronomistic Historian used it? Minimalists such as Davies believe that Yashar and others like it were fictive creations of a Persian-period Deuteronomistic History. I do not think that Isser here maintains the standard of quality argumentation observable elsewhere in this magnificent text. In addition, this chapter also begins the comparison of the Davidic material with other hero legends. On page 28, Isser lists some of the shared motifs between the Deuteronomistic Historian's presentation of David and the Homeric epic. One such motif is the lament for fallen heroes. I take issue with that in the respect that Isser fails to mention Absalom alongside Saul, Jonathan, and Abner. Perhaps it is of a different character, this lament for a family member, over against a lament for supposed

enemies? It would be better, in my estimation, had Isser dealt with these shared motifs in greater detail than merely listing them.

One must back off a bit from this criticism, however, upon approaching Isser's fourth chapter. This segment is devoted to a lengthy comparison between the Davidic tradition and the King Arthur cycle of British mythology. At the outset he draws again on his mentor Van Seters: "Tales do not grow into legends which create the hero; rather, the reverse is true, that once a hero is established, tales and legends are associated with him" (48–49). The development of the Arthurian legends into "what claimed to be historiography" (47) is thus of great significance for the examination of the Davidic legends. The definitive medieval version of the Arthurian legends comes from Geoffrey of Monmouth, written down seven centuries after the Saxon wars out of which Arthur's status grew (51). The document produced thus naturally has so small a connection to the actual events that one may indeed call it "false," at least in terms of factual accuracy. Nevertheless, factual reporting is not as important as the implications of this document in building up the image of the hero, whether hero David or Achilles or Arthur.

"The growth of the David tradition," writes Isser at the beginning of chapter 5, "has steps similar to those of the Homeric and Arthurian tradition, but in a different order. According to the biblical account, the 'event' occurred not before a dark age but at the end of or during the last stage of a period of invasions and migrations" (52). According to the biblical account, David's fame was built precisely because he inaugurated a period of prosperity at the beginning of the fledgling nation's life. Upon closer examination, this statement is not quite accurate, because in the Arthurian legends a similar motif occurs. Camelot and all the other trappings of the peaceful kingdom of the Britons came after the defeat and removal of the threat of Saxon invaders, the legends maintaining that Arthur earned his spires in fighting the Saxons. This is closer than Isser allows to the rise of David's status through his battles against and ultimate triumph over the Philistines, after which the legend turns to describing the glories, intrigue, and eventual collapse of his court (on which see below). This misstep does not do irrevocable damage to Isser's presentation, but greater precision is certainly important in comparative studies such as this one.

Isser also answers in this chapter a question I raised earlier in reference to the Scroll of Yashar: "The thesis presented here is that at some subsequent stage prior to the Deuteronomistic version of Samuel-Kings there emerged a popular fixed legend of David which became a more or less authoritative canon of stories to be included" (53). Isser does not claim that this must have been a written text (53). More important for his thesis, however, is the fact that, again, the unity of the Davidic legends in their present form comes several centuries after their reported events, and so it is critical to ask the question:

“How much of the David story in Samuel-Kings was then based on the earlier tales or a pre-exilic fixed legend? The answer depends on how great the discontinuity was, and that is precisely the crux of the debate between the minimalists and their opponents” (53–54). A key discussion in this chapter concerns David Gunn’s suggestion of a “postulated original” of the Deuteronomistic material that was then available to subsequent modifications in the same way as Geoffrey of Monmouth’s presentation of Arthur was modified by Thomas Malory. The historical details in the Davidic legends are a bit of embellishment to make a later text sound earlier. I would generally concur in this assessment, and Isser is as always very careful to establish his mediating position. He suggests again that his aim is “to explore the alternative thesis: that the story of David is less history and more a developing cycle of legends” (71).

This exploration immediately becomes the focus of the sixth chapter. Here Isser fills out his interesting suggestion that some of the elements in the David traditions are in fact abbreviations of longer narratives existing in a secular tradition quite apart from the production of the Hebrew Bible. Isser takes issue again with the minimalists, who tend to see these supposed remnants as fictive elements invented by the Deuteronomistic Historian. Isser’s response: “To see these short notices not as abbreviations but as complete texts taken from an early archive and not abbreviated by Dtr makes little sense. These are summaries of stories with legendary exaggerations, not merely lists of royal employees. . . . [T]hese notices are peripheral to Dtr’s editorial aims, and accordingly, their abbreviation and removal from the chronological narrative to an appendix is understandable. They might even detract from David’s glory” (73). More directly: “Contrary to the most radical of the minimalists, there is no compelling reason to believe that all of this literature was an invention of the Persian period rather than a selected, reworked, and redacted collection of previously existing legal and narrative traditions. The use of Persian motifs would belong only to the last stage in the development of the story of David in Samuel-Kings” (92). Isser goes on to claim that these notices about other heroes could not have been removed entirely, lest the Deuteronomistic History be written off by its audience (73–77). Indeed, far from being evidence that the Deuteronomistic Historian made up the whole thing, these short notices were in fact part of the received tradition that could not have been left out: “The ‘fixed’ or crystallized but still not static collection of narratives of the pan-Israelite story comes very close to Gunn’s ‘postulated original’ and [Isser’s] ‘fixed legend.’ While some of its components may go back to early bardic or folk origins, the oral character of the culture . . . allows the tradition to go though [*sic*] new stories and alternative tellings of existing episodes” (85).

The final two chapters deal with “a fresh look at David in the twenty-first century.” This fresh look is divided into two sections for the two chapters. Chapter 7 deals with the young David, chapter 8 with the events surrounding David’s reign as king. Much as in his

earlier summary of scholarship on the Davidic tradition, Isser makes mention of many of the key players over the last couple of decades, lining them up in particular in terms of the relative positions on the minimalist-positivist continuum. Throughout both of these chapters he considers the suggestion that the Deuteronomistic History presents an ideologically driven apology for David's rise to and maintenance of power. I would take issue in these lengthy chapters only with Isser's treatment of the matter of Uriah the Hittite. First, while I would certainly not disagree that this episode represents some of the best genius of the Deuteronomistic material, Isser has failed to reckon with the fact that 1 Kgs 15:5 is wholly out of context with regard to David. Second, while I agree that the sin as it is reported is done in such a way as to minimize the damage to David's character, Isser has apparently uncritically accepted David's position as the paradigmatic king, without regard to the canonically later presentation of Josiah. Admittedly, even though his text is not a treatment of the Deuteronomistic History as a whole, it is a fact that the Deuteronomistic material is shot through with the name of David and ideology about David, and so one is remiss not to take a more comprehensive view of the matter.

This criticism and the others to which I have called attention aside, I think Isser has offered to his readers a text that is at once sufficiently engaged with critical issues to satisfy scholars and also eminently accessible to nonspecialists. He maintains at the end, and throughout, that someone, whether "[t]he apologist, a contemporary, a later dynastic propagandist, or Dtr, who is [Isser's] preference, has framed the story in David's favor" (152). Issues such as the length of David's reign remain difficult to unpack ("The total of forty years of too schematic for comfort" [153]). In addition, Isser hints, as do some of the other texts with which he dialogues, that Solomon's succession was illegitimate, thus calling into question the entire notion of a Davidic dynasty. Unfortunately, however, he does not deal with this possibility at any length. Nevertheless, this is a very fine text. I recommend it highly, as it should promote much discussion of the controversial, striking, ineluctable, and intellectually powerful figure of David the king.