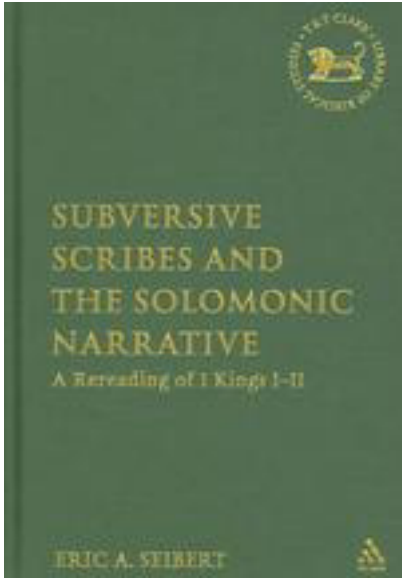


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Seibert, Eric A.

Subversive Scribes and the Solomonic Narrative: A Rereading of 1 Kings 1-11

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Subversive Scribes and the Solomonic Narrative is a revision of Eric Seibert's doctoral dissertation, completed in 2002 under the supervision of Herbert Huffmon, Jacques Berlinerblau, and Gary Knoppers. Seibert's study is an examination of subversive scribal activity, a feature of literary production that has been discussed in numerous prior works but that has not been systematically studied before. In this volume Seibert seeks "to contribute to the ongoing discussion by investigating the Solomonic narrative through the optics of propaganda and, specifically, subversion" (4) by paying special attention to texts that appear to "covertly undermine the legitimacy or the legacy of Solomon" (5).

The book is organized in two major sections, the first of which delves into the theory of subversive scribal activity. Chapter 1 is devoted to working out definitions of propaganda and subversion and briefly appraising other studies that have utilized these literary categorizations in the discussion of biblical texts. While propaganda has often been thought of as "false" and therefore an inappropriate lens through which to read the Hebrew Bible, Seibert proposes defining it "as a form of persuasion consciously deployed with the intention of convincing others to see things from the point of view of the propagator" (13). For propaganda to be successful, it must, to some extent, resonate with the preconceptions of the audience (12). What this means is that "the propagandist does this not in order to deceive but in order to convince the intended audience that his or her

perspective is the right one” (14). With this nuanced understanding of propaganda, Seibert then goes on to understand subversion as “a subset of propaganda since both activities seek to persuade” (15). He sets forth a working definition of subversion as “a form of propaganda whose persuasive efforts are directed towards undermining, criticizing or otherwise ‘corroding’ an ideology, institution or individual” (16). Once these definitions have been established, Seibert expands his definition of subversion by differentiating between two different ways in which subversion is carried out. Scribes who enjoy some distance (e.g., in geography or time) between themselves and the object of critique could engage in conspicuous subversion. For those who were too closely associated with the entity they wanted to critique, they would have to launch their critique in a more calculated way in order “to avoid open detection without totally obscuring the message” (16). After working out his definitions, Seibert then reviews biblical scholarship that has employed the language of propaganda and subversion or other, similar categories, showing that others have found these categories helpful for understanding the nature and function of particular biblical texts and books (19–40).

In chapter 2 Seibert undertakes an extensive examination of the role of scribes in the ancient Near East, paying special attention to their social location and their relationship to the royal establishment (43–44). This chapter is concerned with how the institutional affiliation of scribes affected their behavior in terms of what they wrote: Did scribes always write what they were told? Did they always toe the party line? Or did they have minds of their own that they somehow sought to express in their writings? If they did express themselves in materials they were employed to produce, then how did they do so? In seeking to answer these questions, Seibert distinguishes between two kinds of scribes in two different groups. First, scribes were either “tethered,” which means they were tied to an organization, or they were “untethered” and therefore autonomous from royal power and free to write what they wanted. Among those scribes who were “tethered,” in this case to the royal court itself or to the temple, Seibert finds two more categories of scribes: “submissive scribes” were loyalists who wrote what they were told (62); “subversive scribes” were those individuals who dissented, at least to a degree, with those under whom they worked and who therefore did not necessarily always write what they were told (63–65). These scribes, while writing under the direct or indirect employ of the government, wanted to criticize that government (65–66). In order to engage in literary critique of their employers, they had to do so covertly; otherwise, they would be detected and exposed. On the other hand, their critique could not be so vague that no one could detect it. These subversive scribes had to include enough clues in their writing for those readers who shared their views to detect and appreciate their critique, but not so many that opponents could charge them with treason. Seibert explores the techniques these subversive scribes appear to have used in order to carry out their subversive writing,

including the use of camouflaged character critiques, redactional recasting, prophetic fronts, self-incriminatory statements, strategic omissions, and ambiguity (67–77). The remainder of the chapter explores ways in which readers might determine whether subversion is actually being used in passages that are more ambiguous (77–86) and of identifying intentional subversion (86–92).

In the second half of the book, Seibert takes the strategy he has worked out in the first half and applies it to 1 Kgs 1–11. He begins in chapter 3 by briefly outlining various methodological considerations and working assumptions pertinent to this portion of the Hebrew Bible. Seibert discusses the manuscript evidence for 1 Kgs 1–11 and the role that textual criticism may play in the study (97–100). He gives some attention to the question of a Deuteronomistic History (DtrH) and of the activity of the Deuteronomist in these chapters (100–101). A third area of inquiry in this chapter that is especially interesting is Seibert’s discussion of whether the narrative was originally pro- or anti-Solomonic. While contradictory character assessments and conflicting evaluations of Solomon have usually become “the raw material which allowed the text to be divided up into its constituent pieces” (101), Seibert argues that the elements that create narrative tension in the passage under question may evidence authorship by a subversive scribe rather than point to multiple authorship or the weaving together of disparate sources (101–103). Seibert brings the chapter to a conclusion with a brief assessment of the Succession Narrative (103–9) and some brief comments about the presence of the Deuteronomist in 1 Kgs 1–2 (109–10).

Chapter 4 contains Seibert’s actual study of the Solomonic narrative. In this lengthy chapter he explores elements of both propaganda and subversion in 1 Kgs 1–2 and the implications of their peculiar coexistence in these chapters. He begins by seeking to demonstrate that 1 Kgs 1–2 is intended to function as political propaganda designed to legitimate Solomon’s rise to power. While Solomon and/or his supporters commissioned the production of apologetic texts in order to defend the newly installed king, they could not simply pass over questionable or objectionable incidents that were well known to the intended recipients of the work. Seibert notes several ways that the text of 1 Kgs 1–2 supports Solomon’s right to rule, but he also finds disquieting hints that appear throughout these chapters and that seek to subvert him. While the author(s) of 1 Kgs 1–2 has produced a text with a propagandistic function, the author is not an unquestioning apologist of the court. Seibert suggests that the connotations of disapproval may have been intentionally sown into the narrative by an author or authors who disagreed with royal policy.

In chapter 5 Seibert surveys passages that seem to provide examples of scribal subversion in the remainder of the Solomonic narrative (1 Kgs 3–11). He examines Solomon’s

marriage to an Egyptian princess (158–60), Solomon’s cultic activities at the Gibeonite “high place” (160–61), the laudatory evaluation of Solomon in 1 Kgs 3:2–3 (161–64), Solomon’s Gibeonite dream (164–66), his purchase of wood with wheat (166–69), his levying of laborers (169–70), his temple dedication prayer (171–72), the circumscription of royal power to the Torah (172–73), Solomon’s cession of twenty cities to Hiram of Tyre (173–77), the Queen of Sheba’s words of praise (177–78), and the relationship of Solomon to the regulations of the kingship (179–80).

In the final chapter Seibert outlines the conclusions he has drawn from his study and also suggests some areas that may prove fruitful for further study. From among Seibert’s seven conclusions, I will highlight a few. Seibert concludes that, in contrast to previous studies that have bifurcated the text, his study has argued that subversion runs throughout much of the narrative, which may suggest “that the text is markedly more complex than a simple two-part division suggests, and this casts doubt on efforts to determine precisely where praise stops and criticism begins” (182). It seems that this argument could make an important contribution to future studies of 1 Kgs 1–11, particularly the authorship of these chapters. Seibert also concludes that, “by emphasizing the nature and range of scribal activity, this study has demonstrated the importance of taking the social impulses behind the production of the text into account when trying to ascertain its meaning” (184). In view of the usual disparity between literary and historical criticism, this seems to be a valuable contribution. A final conclusion that Seibert draws is that, if the narrative was “ostensibly written as a piece of political propaganda but riddled with many subversive elements,” then it “most likely had its origins during the reign of Solomon” (186). Seibert argues that the need for a Solomonic defense early in his reign makes good sense, but “it becomes much more difficult to explain the rationale for such an apologia in the late seventh century BCE or any subsequent period” (186). While not disallowing the possibility of later redaction, Seibert is essentially making the case here for tenth-century authorship of 1 Kgs 1–2.

Subversive Scribes and the Solomonic Narrative seems to be based, at least to a degree, on a hermeneutic of suspicion (mentioned specifically on 75 and 88) that may be seen to lead, at times, to overreaching. However, Seibert does urge “due caution” with regard to his model, and he notes that “reading against the grain is a useful strategy for detecting subversive elements, but it can become ridiculous, missing the real point(s) of the story by imposing readings upon the text neither recognizable by attentive hearers/readers nor imagined by the original writers” (183–84). With these caveats in mind, one can overlook specific proposals with which one may disagree and focus instead on Seibert’s overall concepts of scribal motivation and technique, which make important contributions and open up new pathways for scholarly exploration.