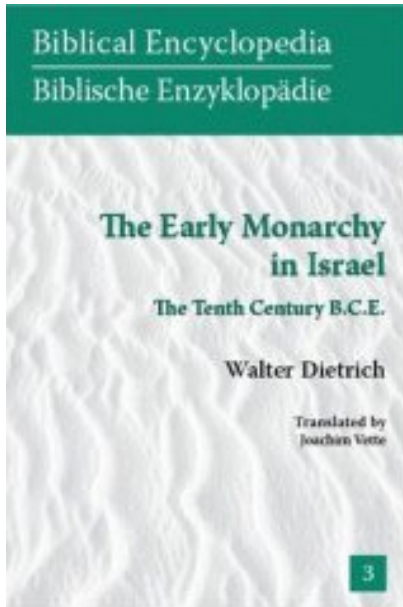


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The Early Monarchy in Israel: The Tenth Century B.C.E.

Translated by Joachim Vette

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Over the last two decades, the tenth century B.C.E. in Israel has performed much the same role in biblical scholarship and archaeology as a magician's assistant: one minute you see it, and the next you don't. This ephemeral shimmering has made it virtually impossible to discuss the tenth century with both historical conviction and intellectual modesty; however, Walter Dietrich has managed to combine these two noteworthy stances in what will deservedly be a staple volume in the field for years to come. Dietrich's familiarity with the biblical material in Samuel–Kings and with the archaeological data gleaned from a plethora of sites in the southern Levant positions him as one of the foremost contemporary authorities on the early monarchy of Israel. This book is the fruit of nearly three decades' labor in the field and combines the results of Dietrich's many publications, including at least four major monographs on the development of Samuel–Kings (*Prophetie und Geschichte* [1972]; *David, Saul und die Propheten* [1987]; *Die Samuelbücher* [with Thomas Naumann, 1995]; *David: Der Herrscher mit der Harfe* [2006]) and the first fascicles of a commentary on Samuel (BKAT 8.1.1–4), not to mention several shorter articles (e.g., those collected in his *Von David zu den Deuteronomisten* [2002]). The volume is divided into four roughly defined categories that overlap with one another to some extent: (1) "The Biblical Account of the Time Period"; (2) "The History of the

Early Monarchy”; (3) “The Literature of the Time Period”; and, finally, (4) “Theological Conclusions.” These sections are summarized briefly and evaluated in order below.

The first section (1–98) constitutes primarily a literary evaluation and retelling of the biblical portrayal of the early monarchic period in Israel, reliant upon the texts both of 1 Samuel–1 Kings and of 1–2 Chronicles. Although Dietrich begins with a synchronic reading of those corpora (6–26), he offers in a second, deeper level of analysis a reading of the pre-Deuteronomistic sources (26–98) as they portrayed the period before their inclusion in a specifically *Deuteronomistic* History. One point of difficulty in this section is that it implicitly relies on the diachronic analysis of the third section, although Dietrich glosses over the issue for the time being, removing only the purely Deuteronomistic overlay, which is relatively minimal in Samuel. The Deuteronomistic changes to the text “are significant, but they are neither very extensive nor structurally very significant” (27). This “pre-Deuteronomistic” representation of the tenth century, then, is properly located in the late-seventh or early-sixth century B.C.E. and thus already stands at nearly three centuries’ removal from the period it represents. While this datum need not serve as an indictment of the text’s historical verisimilitude, one must be cognizant of this chronological separation while reading this introductory chapter. All in all, however, Dietrich’s dutiful exposition refrains from oversimplifying the text’s contribution to historical endeavors in this regard and establishes a basic description of 1 Sam 1–1 Kgs 11 against which a discussion of the historical tenth century may proceed.

The book’s second section (99–226) departs from the preceding discussion in its very first pages with a finely nuanced differentiation between “biblical history” and “factual history” (99–110). There follows a methodological discourse on the means of establishing sociohistorical data for the period under investigation, including comparisons to the social and political situations of earlier and later periods in Israel, as well as the discovery of analogies to similarly structured societies (110–20). Broad surveys of tenth-century archaeological (120–44) and tenth- and ninth-century textual (145–54) data provide a starting point for Dietrich’s historical reconstruction of the tenth century in the southern Levant (162–226). These features sustain several important historical-political conclusions concerning Judah and Israel in the tenth century, for example, the relatively small size of Saul’s domain (174–77) and the organization of this polity as a tribal chiefdom (189), David’s political ascendancy as a galvanizing factor—rather than a product—of the consolidation of “Judahite” tribal identity (178–80), and the limited nature of the so-called “Davidic-Solomonic empire” (188). Dietrich thus charts an appropriately moderate course between the two extremes of literal positivism and abject skepticism with respect to the sociopolitical situation of the tenth-century southern Levant. However, a tendentious approach to the event-historical particularities of this reconstruction—the *histoire événementielle*, to use Braudelian terminology—is

encountered in Dietrich's appraisal of the biblical sources' historical credibility (154–62). Here Dietrich outlines three salient criteria whereby the biblical source texts are to be evaluated for reliability: (1) source material is, generally, more reliable than redactional (pre-Deuteronomistic and Deuteronomistic) material; (2) considerations of genre may affect our evaluation of the examined text; and (3) the “communicative intent” of the text may indicate more historical reliability, or, conversely, betray attempts to reinterpret objectionable traditions. Dietrich's application of the criteria for reliability is probably judicious, given the criteria he has established: in general, the passages he considers most reliable are short, specific, and do not betray too much ideological intent (see, e.g., his privileging of the traditions in 1 Sam 13:4, 19–20; etc.). While these criteria may be instructive in broad strokes, however, it is very difficult to see how their application may be governed by any sort of objectivity independent of the interpretive decisions reached during the highly subjective process of composition-critical analysis. It is even more difficult to trace the logic of Dietrich's somewhat schematic ranking of the traditions' reliability (155–62) without an apparatus or system of notation as to how these results were achieved: the graphic schematization of these traditions provides a veneer of fixity and legitimacy over what is in effect an impressionistic and quite malleable selection of traditional units, thoroughgoing redactional strata, and the detritus of random interpretive glosses and insertions. The first several evaluated traditions are sufficient to illustrate the problems with this formalized schematization.

(1) While Dietrich ranks the “body size” tradition of 1 Sam 9:2 in the second-lowest category of reliability, he ranks the similar tradition found in 10:23 within the lowest gradation. But a purely source-critical evaluation of 9:2 suggests that 9:2b is to be reckoned as a secondary, redactional anticipation of 10:23, while 9:2a is integral to the surrounding narrative; how, then, should 9:2 be considered to function as a whole, much less demonstrate a (slightly) higher level of historical reliability than 10:23?

(2) Dietrich relegates the entirety of 9:1–10:16 (“Saul as the son of a wealthy farmer; a seer nominates Saul in a subversive gathering”) to his lowest level of historical reliability. Patently, this “folktale” (as it was recognized to be already by Gressmann nearly a century ago) is historically unreliable, but the lack of any further discussion concerning the overlaid nature of the text (which Dietrich elsewhere admits [105]) arbitrarily flattens what might otherwise—with more nuanced discussion—be a valuable and instructive presentation. For a long time commentators have concluded—justifiably—that the territorial information provided in verses 4–5a provides access to the historical extent of Saul's chieftom/nascent kingdom. The clearly etiological intent of the original folktale does not necessarily impugn the plausibility of *all* of the data contained in it but instead might bolster our confidence in *some* of the information it conveys.

In short, it is the schematic presentation and lack of substantive argumentation that hamper the force of the endeavor as a whole. This representation translates into a historical reconstruction that is relatively convincing in its broad strokes but that, in its finer points, overestimates the value of some data (e.g., in the estimation of this reviewer, 14:49 exhibits a later conflation of two different traditions concerning the number and names of Saul's daughters, and cannot be considered as entirely reliable [cf. 168]; see also 2 Sam 1:19ff.: "David's lament of Saul and Jonathan" [158] is such a "gripping first-person lament ... that we can hardly doubt its authenticity [203]), while at the same time downplaying the *potential* importance of other data (e.g., 1 Sam 9:4–5a [see above] and "18:20ff. Saul's daughter Michal is married to David": even if historically unreliable, the *tradition* of David's marriage to Michal may have been used as an early Davidic claim to the throne of Benjamin).

Dietrich's historical reconstruction is implicitly tied together in a mutually enriching dialectic with the third section of the book, which discusses "The Literature of the Time Period" (227–316). One wonders whether this section would not more appropriately have preceded the foregoing chapter, since its conclusions are ultimately bound up with the criteria on which Dietrich has based his appraisal of the traditions' reliability. Nevertheless, this section provides a thorough introduction to the complicated composition history of 1 Sam 1–1 Kgs 11, at least as expounded in Dietrich's own work. Again, Dietrich charts a course of moderation through the stormy seas of diachronic analysis; many of the traditions of 1–2 Samuel he considers to be authentically old, with later interpretive elaborations. Here Dietrich presents his own (diplomatic) schema, rather than some eclectic presentation attempting to synthesize the results of the various recent proposals; the result is thus a streamlined, easily read treatise on the early sources of Samuel–Kings bearing much in common with other such recent, moderate works propounding a relatively early date for some of the traditions contained in these books (e.g., S. Seiler's *Die Geschichte von der Thronfolge Davids*, S. K. Bietenhard's *Des Königs General*, J. Vermeulen's *La loi du plus fort*). Obviously, readers will disagree with Dietrich in the particulars, but his moderation is especially refreshing to the present reviewer in light of more extreme proposals to date much of this material to the end of the monarchic period, if not well into or after the Babylonian exile. Unfortunately, the translation of Dietrich's volume was only spottily updated (see, e.g., mention of A. A. Fischer at 242 and revised bibliography throughout) to take into consideration the past decade's novel approaches challenging the antiquity of much of Samuel–Kings (one thinks particularly of R. G. Kratz's *The Composition of the Narrative Books of the Old Testament*, as well as monographs and articles by A. A. Fischer, R. Müller, T. A. Rudnig, and K.-P. Adam). In general, therefore, this section serves as an excellent English-language (re)orientation to the composition-critical dialogue over Samuel–Kings that has progressed in Continental

Europe while lying more-or-less fallow in Anglophone scholarship over the past two decades (with a few exceptions); however, the translation's delay of ten years has—understandably—made it virtually impossible for Dietrich to take into full account the most recent work on the textual history of Samuel to have emerged from the (new) Göttingen school and its intellectual congeners. Unfortunately, a more up-to-date survey of the past decade's approaches would have been desirable; moreover, it would have been quite interesting to see how Dietrich engaged this more recent work.

Despite its relatively small share in the book's heft, the final section (317–49) comprises a weighty theological appraisal of 1–2 Samuel. Age-old (and well-known) discussions—for example, those concerning the ambivalence of political authority over against divine rule or the apparently arbitrary nature of election and rejection—are juxtaposed to more recently established areas of theological inquiry—such as relations of power between the sexes and the ambivalence of the biblical text with respect to violence. This arrangement establishes for Dietrich a fruitful forum in which to propose areas for further confessional reflection of the continued significance of the biblical narratives in the modern day. While brief, this chapter offers a cogent and thoughtful set of approaches to some of the theological difficulties encountered in a reading of 1–2 Samuel; as such, it would serve as an excellent orientation to theological study of the book in seminary classes, as well as provide the reader with a basic introduction to and bibliography for the relevant areas of inquiry.

Written as both an introduction to the historical tenth century and as a detailed discussion of the biblical portrayal thereof, this book fills a lacuna that has long been apparent in biblical studies: it is best considered as a textbook on the historical and social contexts of texts now contained specifically in 1 Sam 1–1 Kgs 11 or 12. While it cannot offer the specialist an up-to-date analysis of every pertinent discussion, the book's breadth of interest more than makes up for its various deficiencies, and may be highly recommended for use in the seminary-level and graduate-level classroom. Its purpose as a basic resource for the study of 1–2 Samuel and 1 Kings is made all the more compelling by Joachim Vette's fluid translation and its recently updated bibliographies of major works.