

**DAVID'S SECRET DEMONS:
MESSIAH, MURDERER, TRAITOR, KING**

by Halpern, B¹

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Reviewed by Werner Lategan

In this publication Halpern attempts to reconstruct a life of the historical David, based on available biblical material. He provides the reader with a very well written and thoroughly researched publication (Though the reader might at times feel a bit lost in all the minute detail and technicalities, e.g. the discussion of David and Hadadezer (chapter 9)). In it the reader will find a historical, textual, psychological and archaeological analysis of the existing biblical material. His book is divided into five parts (Part I, *David in writing*. Part II, *Penetrating the textual veil*. Part III, *Defining David's empire*. Part IV, *A historical overture to David's career*. Part V, *A life of David*), including an Appendix (*The archaeology of David's reign*). Twenty-three chapters in all, the publication forms part of *The Bible in its world* series that attempts to offer an in-depth view of significant aspects of the biblical world, in order to enhance the understanding of biblical texts and their settings.

Halpern begins by raising the important question namely, *what makes us accept or reject a certain evaluation of a specific person?* He continues by stating that he framework(s) of historical narrative(s) often confines our imagination of events (xiv). Thus we see only what we are supposed or intended to see. In order to escape the framework of the historical narrative, *we need only imagine the events from a political and ideological position opposite that of the text* (xv). In this publication, Halpern wants to present too his readers a reconstructive glimpse of David as his enemies saw him, but also a glimpse of how his closest associates saw him (xv). He attempts to give a voice to David's opponents. Halpern's reconstruction of David is the opposite of the picture we find of David in 1 & 2 Samuel. In Halpern's reconstruction David is the anti-David or anti-Messiah. This reconstruction might raise a few eyebrows, but in doing this he attempts *to give a voice to the people who were unable to express their own views in the biblical text(s)*. In the process of reconstructing history, we must listen to many voices, not just the dominant ones.

Halpern take's the historical nature of 1 and 2 Samuel very serious (as part of the writings of the Deuteronomistic historian). However, ancient Near Eastern, including Israelite-Judean historiography should not be understood in a positivistic sense. To Halpern, *the art of History is casting light into the dark, it is imagination based on evidence* (101). Understood correctly, it can furnish a perspective unrepresented in the text, giving a voice to those who do not speak, who have not left ideologically charged records, who have not successfully manipulated the technologies of persuasion. However, the interpreter should be conscious of his/her own interests in the reconstruction of history. Halpern does not really state this clearly enough. The reader might get the impression that Halpern is

1. Baruch Halpern holds the Chaiken Family Chair in Jewish Studies and is professor of ancient history, classics and ancient Mediterranean studies, and religious studies at Pennsylvania State University.

trying to show *how it actually was*, and that this is the primary purpose of a historical reconstruction.

Halpern is correct in saying that what we read in 1 and 2 Samuel is only a profile of David. That we see the sides that an apologist (or perhaps a later redactor) wanted us to see, or that an ancient audience was intended to see (14). David, as we have him in biblical material, is a literary character. However, the David that we have in biblical material is also a very human character. According to Halpern, the *first human* in literature, the first *true individual*, the first *modern human* (6). He tries to indicate how the imposition of our own cultural values in interpretation can veil the text's *real meaning*. It is true that we must be weary of historical or cultural anachronism, but a question that needs further discussion is whether we can determine the *real meaning* of the text? Is there a *real meaning*, or does a text have many potential meanings in the process of interpretation?

Halpern's primary source for reconstructing a life of David is the books of Samuel. David's character and career, as presented in the biblical material, is essentially molded on the Israelite idea of the "hero" and biographies of ancient Near Eastern kings who founded dynasties. The source of 1 and 2 Samuel was also influenced by existing Israelite material by the time it was composed. Halpern identifies two parallel narratives in 1 Sam. 8 to 2 Sam. 1. This A and B source does show conflicting ideas, but are mostly complementary. Their primary divergence is in the introduction of the monarchy into Israel (15). In his attempt to date 2 Samuel, he pays close attention to the language of the text (grammar and vocabulary), as well as comparing it with other ancient Near Eastern sources. He considers a dating of 2 Samuel to the late 10th century as viable. Halpern states that, *to reconstruct David, one has mainly to understand the books of Samuel and especially the intentions that shaped them* (73). Another question that needs further discussion is whether or not texts really are as intentional as Halpern make them out to be?

Part 3, chapter 5 *How to take up what kings set down* (107-132), is one of the most useful and insightful components of the book. For Halpern, history is the *public form of memory* (111) and the question is *how does one consolidate royal propaganda and historical probability*. In an attempt to do exactly this, Halpern identifies and employs the so-called *Tiglath-Pileser Principle* (124). The technique (used in ancient Near Eastern historiography) involves *putting extreme spin on real events* (126). The question is, *what is the minimum the king might have done to lay claim to the achievements he publishes?* By using this technique each small mark of prestige becomes, in the end, the evidence for a grand triumph (126). In some respects this political hermeneutic still applies today. The spin in ancient Near Eastern royal historiography reflects the social circumstances in which the text was written (128), but also the royal ideal of the time. The work also reflects assumptions as to its readership. One should consider the limited literacy at the time of the writing of the book of Samuel. In this regard the literature is addressed to a certain audience (the literate elite, *alias* the insider audience. Against them stand the outsiders who might consider the text to be false, or the unlettered reader, who might take the text at face value), that would be able to identify egregious falsification. *The spin, or rhetorical exaggeration had to be applied within a framework of linguistic conventions that insiders understood and accepted* (130). The insider audience knew how to discount the spin. In this regard, modern audiences mostly form part of the outsider audience. In order to discount the spin, the principle of *minimal interpretation*, not minimalism, has abiding application (131). Thus, the evidence in 1 and 2 Samuel is based on real events, communicated in the form of public memory.

Part I to IV serves as a prelude to the reconstruction of a life of David, as we find it in Part V (263-424). There is quite a bit of repetition, but the reconstruction of the life of the historical David is undertaken and understood in the light of the preceding chapters. Part V is very informative and once again Halpern's ability as a writer becomes apparent. Throughout this section we find a meticulously close reading of the biblical material. However, he often uses the phrase *might have been* or *may have been* in his reconstructions, which might leave the reader with a notion that this chapter is, in the end, very speculative. This might lead to a relativistic view of historical reconstructions, which might strengthen the case of the minimalists, instead of encouraging a minimal interpretation of the biblical texts concerning David and the Davidic state/monarchy.

In his earlier publication *The first historians: The Hebrew Bible and History*, Halpern argued that the Deuteronomistic Historian wrote not *the* history of Israel, but *a* history of Israel. Likewise Halpern reconstructed *a* life of the historical David and as such represents one interpretation of existing biblical material. It will be interesting to see the response of certain minimalists, since many questions are still (understandably) left unanswered. Halpern's work requires a close reading by other experts in the field of ancient Near Eastern historiography and hopefully it will lead to a healthy debate.

Halpern comes to the conclusion that there was a historical David and that his achievement in creating Judah and conquering Israel left (through his wife - Bathsheba and Solomon his successor, though not his son) a legacy of hope and aspiration (479-480). Even though this legacy has little to do with the real David. As Halpern puts it, *later imaginings magnify a small, sanitize a corrupt, and beautify an ugly reality, a reality there nevertheless was. The biblical story of David is essentially mythic in nature* (480). But this does not mean that it is untrue and that David never existed.

Although this book represents an important chapter in the quest for the historical David, it is by no means a concluding chapter. Still, I would recommend Halpern's book to all students and scholars interested in the field of ancient Near Eastern, but more specifically Israelite-Judean historiography as well as the debate concerning the historicity of David and the Davidic state/monarchy. This publication could shed some light for students and ministers grappling with questions regarding the historicity, reliability and ultimately the authority of the Bible. Some demons may be put to rest.