

BARUCH HALPERN, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK, 2001. xx, 492 pp. \$30.00. ISBN 0-8028-4478-2.

In recent years a number of so-called minimalists or revisionists have claimed that the United Kingdom of David and Solomon never existed, and that the stories about these kings are no more historical than the legends about King Arthur, dating from the Persian or even the Hellenistic period. In this remarkably rich and learned book Halpern decisively rejects this view, paying special attention to King David.

In defending the antiquity of the traditions about David and a United Monarchy, Halpern has a whole barrage of arguments, too many to be listed here. These include such things as the evidence of the ninth-century Aramaic Tel Dan stele, which already attests 'the house of David' just over a century after David is supposed to have lived; archaeological evidence from tenth-century Israel indicating that the country had already achieved statehood; the large number of defective spellings in the Hebrew of the David narratives, suggesting a pre-exilic date; and the fact that the deuteronomistic historian clearly had authentic sources deriving from later in the tenth century BCE, as attested by the reference to Pharaoh Shishak's invasion in 1 Kings 14:25 ff., so why should they suddenly come to an end then?

However, a particularly significant feature of Halpern's book is the way in which he argues that the account in 1 Samuel 16–1 Kings 2 shows a number of apologetic traits, suggesting that it is concerned to counter certain accusations against David. Such an apologetic intention makes sense only if David actually existed and, moreover, suggests that the account must derive from a period close to David's own time, since the need for such an apologetic would not have existed later. Adopting a hermeneutic of suspicion, Halpern reads against the grain of the biblical text and argues that David was in fact implicated in the deaths of various people which the Bible attributes to others: Saul and his sons at Gilboa, Nabal, Ishbaal, Abner, Amnon, Absalom and Amasa (in addition to the deaths of Saul's descendants, which 2 Samuel 21 acknowledges). David was not, as he puts it, someone whom one would wish to invite to dinner! Halpern's conclusions in this regard are similar to those of Steven L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography*, a book that appeared just a year prior to Halpern's. Halpern finds it too much of a coincidence that so many of these deaths which were convenient for David happened without his being involved. He notes that the writer tends to provide David with alibis, and finds this suspicious. Halpern makes a plausible case, but in the nature of things it is impossible to be certain, and of course he might be right in some instances and wrong in others. In the case of Absalom, for example, if David really was responsible for his death one wonders why the writer felt the necessity to deny it, since in being a rebel it was perfectly understandable that he should be put to death. Surprisingly, however, Halpern (unlike McKenzie) does not hold David responsible at all for the death of Uriah the Hittite, the one death for which the Bible does apportion blame to David, and he even thinks the story of David's adultery with Bathsheba may be invented. According to Halpern, this story was made up in order to cover up the fact that it was Uriah, not David, who was the father of Solomon. He thinks the name Solomon means 'his [i.e. Uriah's] replacement', but this seems a somewhat speculative suggestion, as does the whole notion that Solomon was the son of Uriah the Hittite.

Almost a hundred pages are devoted to a study of the narrative of David's conquests in 2 Samuel 8. Whilst concluding from a close reading of the text that David's empire was not as great as has traditionally been supposed, Halpern thinks it likely that the account is based on a tenth-century victory stele erected by David himself. The case is strengthened if Halpern is correct that 2 Samuel 8:3 and 13 explicitly mention such a stele.

Overall Halpern has written an important and provocative book, one that puts forward good grounds for believing that there is a solid core of historical tradition (however much overlaid with pro-Davidic bias) lying behind the stories of King David, much greater than some recent revisionist historians have allowed. At the same time, however, it seems that Halpern's vivid historical imagination sometimes leads him into questionable speculations, and that on occasion he carries the hermeneutic of suspicion too far. But Halpern has put us all in his debt with an impressive and well researched volume, which will doubtless stimulate discussion as well as controversy among scholars for years to come.

Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford

JOHN DAY

YVONNE SHERWOOD, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000. xii, 321 pp. £15.95. ISBN 0-521-79561-3.

The reception history of biblical texts is in vogue at present, and holds much promise. But it is very difficult to do well. You need two abilities that are seldom found together: voluminous reading, so as to be able to cover two or more thousand years of the study and appropriation of the chosen text, and sharp analytical ability, so that the resulting book is not simply an immense heap of information but is ordered and mapped. Yvonne Sherwood, happily, possesses both abilities in spades. The result is one of the most stimulating works on any biblical text that I have read in years. It sets a new standard for the study of reception history.

Sherwood deals with both 'historical-critical' commentaries (which she dubs 'The Mainstream' and sees as typically characterised by an anti-semitic bias in which Jonah becomes a cipher for an allegedly 'particularistic' Judaism) and with Jewish and popular treatments of Jonah, including both rabbinic commentary and much modern literature ('Backwaters and underbellies'). Here her background in English (and other) literature and her experience in postmodern theory come into their own. Informed by both mainstream and backwaters, her own work then proceeds to an original reading of Jonah. She reads it as a subversive text, in many ways parodic, generically shape-shifting and slippery, hard to pin down. But that in turn leads her to argue that the other prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible tend to have a similarly unsettling character, which a 'positivistic' biblical criticism all too easily overlooks.

As well as providing a survey of the reception of Jonah in commentary, literature and art, the book also has a thesis: that Jonah has been a text that has served the Christian 'othering' of the Jew. Sherwood's own reading reclaims the text from this abuse, showing that it need not be read as a protest against the 'exclusivism' of Ezra and Nehemiah, but as a much more profound exploration of the puzzling nature of the God of the Hebrew Bible, who defies our theological definitions and cannot be captured in the language of Christian (or Jewish) dogma. In postmodern style she does not of course claim that she has discovered the 'true' meaning of Jonah, but does maintain that her reading 'maps persuasively on to the book' (p. 233). I was certainly persuaded.

A bonus—or rather, an integral aspect of the book—is that Sherwood writes so well. Every page provides entertainment as well as academically rigorous argument. A lot of work on 'the Bible as literature' is so poorly written that it is hard to trust the author's literary judgement. This book, by contrast, is itself 'writing', not simply 'scholarship'. A very exciting work from an outstanding specialist in Biblical Studies.

Oriel College, Oxford

JOHN BARTON