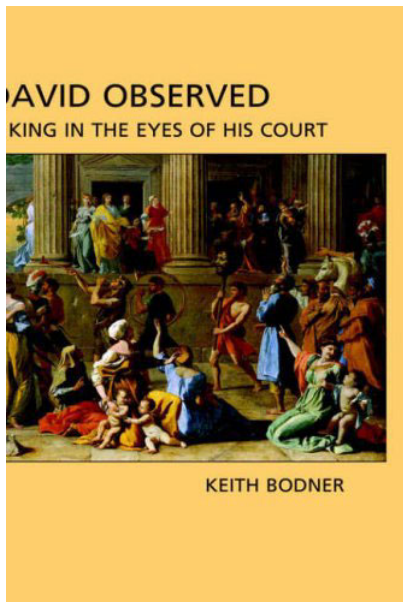


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Bodner, Keith

David Observed: A King in the Eyes of His Court

Hebrew Bible Monographs 5

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The essays in this volume are intended to illumine the personality of David by studying the characters that interact with him in the Samuel-Kings narrative. The first study focuses on David's brother, Eliab, whose "character zone" is determined by his two appearances in 1 Sam 16–17 read together. Bodner argues that Eliab's utterances in the narrative are "double-voiced," a term borrowed from Bakhtin, meaning that the Deuteronomist speaks through Eliab, sounding a warning about the ambiguity of David's character.

The second study enhances a proposal of P. Reis that David and Ahimelech, the priest of Nob, act in collusion against Saul's servant, Doeg. Bodner supports Reis's theory by appealing principally to the Deuteronomist's use of the technique of "delayed exposition," by which background information is given through "analeptic flashback" in the narrative.

The third study, again drawing on Bakhtin, proposes that the critical category of "pseudo-objective motivation" elucidates the story of Abner's assassination in 2 Sam 3. This is a technique well illustrated in Charles Dickens's work whereby a narrative presents an opinion not shared by the author as popularly held. Bodner contends that the ending of 2 Sam 3 is best understood as an instance of this technique:

All the people noticed this, and it was good in their eyes; indeed, everything the king did was good in the eyes of the people. Hence all the people knew, even all Israel, on that day, that it was not from the king to cause the death of Abner son of Ner.

The next five chapters in the volume all deal in some way with 2 Sam 11–12. A character study of Nathan the prophet suggests that there is literary consistency and character development in his three appearances in the narrative (2 Sam 12; 2 Sam 7; 1 Kgs 1), revealing him to be a more complex character than generally recognized. Specifically, he is both a savvy politician and a literary artist, that is, a creative purveyor of fiction. A study of 2 Sam 11:1 asserts that the textual ambiguities in this verse set the tone for narrative ambiguities throughout the chapter. A subsequent essay on 2 Sam 11:3 argues that a textual plus in 4QSam^a (“... the armor bearer of Joab”) deserves narrative attention for its literary foreshadowing and ambiguity as to the state of David’s conscience and for what it suggests about the importance of minor characters.

The next essay on 2 Sam 11 examines Joab as a reader-response critic in his creative interpretation of David’s letter to him concerning Uriah. Joab’s interpretation reveals his uncanny insight into David’s character. The next chapter delves further into the difference between the MT and LXX in their presentations of the messenger sent by Joab to inform David about the siege of Rabbah and death of Uriah. Bodner contends that the difference betrays distinct literary strategies in the witnesses’ respective profiles of David’s reaction to the news.

In chapter 10 Bodner moves to the story of Absalom’s revolt, examining the role of Ahithophel in 2 Sam 15–17 in the light of the revelation in 2 Sam 23:34 that he was Bathsheba’s grandfather.

The final two chapters deal primarily with Solomon and 1 Kgs 1. The first explores an intertextual relationship between this chapter and Gen 27. In both, the enterprising wife of an aged husband schemes to support the cause of a favored younger son over an older one. Bodner posits that through intertextual allusion the narrator in Kings signals the likelihood that Solomon’s character contains many of the ambiguities and complexities of Jacob’s. In the last chapter Bodner focuses on the role of oaths in 1 Kgs 1–2. Solomon, the son of “daughter of swear-an-oath” (Bathsheba), both ascends to the throne and maintains power through the creative use of oaths. In this respect, he is also like his father. His dubious uses of oaths serve to undermine both his character and his claims about divine election.

This is an eminently readable and well-presented book. Each essay is engaging in its own right. Bodner's writing style is clear. Unlike many literary studies, his does not lose the reader in jargon. Rather, he clearly defines and illustrates technical terms and reading strategies. He consistently uses the conclusions at the ends of chapters to synthesize and then draw out the implications of his literary study. The clarity of presentation may be due in large measure to the fact that, as Bodner notes in his introduction, each study began as a class lecture. Indeed, these studies, as well as the book as a whole, are well suited for students, the book's primary intended audience, and would work well in the classroom.

A volume of this sort runs the risk of lack of coherence between essays. There is a certain amount of that here, because each chapter retains its own integrity. As with any collection of essays, there is also some unevenness; certain chapters are more convincing or more problematic than others. I found the last chapter, on swearing in the story of Solomon's accession, and the one on Joab as reader-response critic to be particularly innovative and insightful. By contrast, the observation of Ahithophel's relationship to Bathsheba is not new but goes back to von Rad, as Bodner acknowledges. Moreover, the purported relationship remains a possibility, rather than a certainty, as Bodner seems to treat it. Still, this effort to develop von Rad's observation highlights another feature of Bodner's work that I appreciated. Unlike some other literary critics, Bodner does not feel the need to attack historical criticism. He cites its results (as in the assumption of the existence of the Deuteronomistic History) and even engages in textual criticism at points, blending this approach with his literary analyses.

Among the less-convincing essays in the volume for me was Bodner's appeal to pseudo-objective motivation to explain claims about the people's perspective on Abner's death in 2 Sam 3. The comparison with Dickens does not account for the ubiquity of positive statements about David from nearly all perspectives in Samuel. There may be good reasons to suspect David's complicity in Abner's death, but the narrative's statements about him leave the impression that the author is an apologist for the future king rather than a subtle critic. Bodner's approach in this instance seems anachronistic. There are plenty of examples of ancient apology; can Bodner produce any ancient instance of pseudo-objective motivation other than those alleged to exist here?

The use of textual criticism in this volume is also open to question, as Bodner tends to discount the largely unintentional nature of textual variants. What Bodner is really doing is using textual variants as a heuristic tool for getting at the literary features of the MT. Perhaps it is irrelevant for the kind of literary analysis he is conducting exactly how the textual witnesses came to diverge from one another. Ironically, though, Bodner's neglecting to consider the possibility that a variant was produced as a result of an

accidental copyist's error has the effect of ascribing a certain intentionality to a text where none exists.

These criticisms—or really questions—aside, the essays in this book as a whole are provocative, insightful, and well presented. They will repay careful reading as well as classroom use. The volume is a pleasure to read and to recommend.