

Scholar looks at King David

It sounds odd to most Jews and Christians, but a coterie of "minimalist" or "revisionist" scholars has spent two decades saying the biblical King David probably never existed.

Supposedly, the man the Bible often cites as God's elect and Israel's greatest monarch, and (for Christians) the forebear of Jesus Christ, was fictional or a shadowy King Arthur figure.

David's historical existence is defended by authorities including William Dever of the University of Arizona and Richard Elliott Friedman of UC San Diego.

They're now joined by professor Baruch Halpern of Pennsylvania State University, in "David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King" (Eerdmans). As that sour-

title signals, Halpern seeks to rescue the David of history by belittling him.

Halpern provides a vigorous historical case in favor of David's existence. His linchpin claim is that the biblical narrative (most of 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel and the beginning of 1 Kings) was essentially written in the 10th century B.C. and was contemporary with David or "very nearly" so.

The minimalists claim these writings came centuries later.



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Halpern amasses an impressive case for David's existence — from archaeology, Egyptian inscriptions, weights and measures, names of months, the layout of houses, the shape of Solomon's temple, place names, topography, spelling and use of vowels, vocabulary and general historical plausibility.

Archaeology gave David a big boost when an inscription from the ninth century B.C. turned up at biblical Dan referring to Judah as the "House of David," suggesting very early acknowledgment that David was the founder of the dynasty there.

With this inscription (and some experts would add, a second inscription from biblical Moab, the Mesha Stele), "we no longer need debate the existence of David," Halpern asserts. He also explores the distribution of settlements in the central Negev as depicted in the Bible and confirmed by archaeology. In addition, just after the time of Solomon, a temple inscription at Thebes, Egypt, under the pharaoh Shishaq confirms the general biblical account. The Negev was almost devoid of settlement from Shishaq's time until the seventh century B.C.

The presuppositions of the biblical books of Samuel coincide with the archaeological facts on the ground and an important contemporary inscription, he concludes.

However, Halpern figures the wide geographical extent of the David and Solomon kingdoms, as stated or implied in a number of Bible passages, expressed the hoped-for ideal rather than political reality. In fact, he says, Israelite turf was far more modest.

That doesn't mean Halpern reads the Bible as straight history. His interpretation of the Scriptures is skeptical, even cynical. He sees the biblical history as political "propaganda," so we should read between the lines to surmise what the writers omitted.

On that basis, he proposes,

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we know David existed precisely because the biblical writers were at such pains to explain all-too-convenient deaths and

dismiss other accusations that must have been leveled against David. If no King David ever existed there would never have been any need for such exertions, Halpern reckons.

He sees the David portrayed in the books of Samuel as a sanitized fellow who never existed, but thinks a more rapacious and problematic ruler most certainly did. Ditto for David's son, King Solomon, who was forcibly plunked onto the throne by professional soldiers in a coup. Halpern says the Scriptures say David designated Solomon as his successor to

explain why Solomon won out instead of the expected heir, Adonijah. But Halpern doubts Solomon was really David's son, in part because the narrative strives to combat allegations that he was actually the son of Bathsheba's husband Uriah.

On that, he supposes that

the compelling story of David's sin with Bathsheba, compounded by David's plot to get Uriah killed in battle, was "a fabrication" devised "to show beyond a shadow of a doubt that Solomon was David's son."

See what we mean about cynicism?