

***David, King of Israel, And Caleb in Biblical Memory*, By Jacob L. Wright. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 284 pp. \$80.00 Cloth. \$29.99 Paper**

doi:10.1017/S1755048315000243

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As the most popular cinematic subject drawn from the Hebrew Bible, King David has long been acknowledged as a dramatic and colorful figure. The transformation of the musically gifted young shepherd into a giant-slaying ruler of Israel dominates the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. Recent biblical scholarship views such texts as composite discursive representations requiring literary analysis to unpack the complex political, social, and ideological factors that produced them. Following these trends, Jacob L. Wright promises a “more robust ... model” (10–11), deemphasizing characteristics of David that provide fodder for the big screen in favor of political considerations that shaped the formation, transmission, and adaptation of Davidic traditions. In his analysis, accounts of David negotiate the potentially tense relationship between royal state formation, national identity, and status within Judahite society. Ultimately, David’s story belongs to the project of “imagining a new kind of political community” called “nationhood” or “peoplehood” to address conquest, defeat, and the loss of statehood (11). While such a political framework provides a refreshing and necessary contribution, Wright’s work valuably supplements rather than radically reorients our understanding of biblical David.

Wright’s claims rest on two methodological principles. First, he adopts a “supplementary” in contrast to a “documentarian” approach to biblical composition. Biblical texts are not primarily formed by collating independently-developed documents but rather through “common social activities by which political communities negotiate belonging and status” (12). The David traditions developed in three narrative stages: (1) the history of David’s rise to power over an independent kingdom of Judah (HDR); (2) the United/Divided Kingdom narrative; and (3) the story of Saul and the nation of Israel (HSR). Rejecting the view that earliest portions of the David accounts are the so-called “Court History” and “Succession Narratives” (1 and 2 Samuel), Wright posits that these were preceded

by HDR and HSR, predating the Assyrian conquest of 722 B.C.E. Both narratives were combined prior to 586 B.C.E., becoming the basis for the Court and Succession traditions that legitimate David as King of all Israel. Post-exilic Chronicles adaptively retells Samuel and Kings to valorize peoplehood, rather than kingship and centralization, as a unifying principle. Second, Wright classifies these texts as “war commemorations,” particularly well-suited for political actors who “use war commemoration to negotiate membership, rights, honors, and entitlements in their societies” (12).

The postulation of an independent history of David depends on the striking contention that David created the kingdom of Judah and assumed its rulership prior to Saul and a United Kingdom. Highlighting passages that show David’s independence from Saul and close relationship with Judeans, Wright distinguishes an early version of David, the mercenary of the Philistine warlord Achish who attacked Saul, from the later loyal servant of Saul, who slew Goliath and was uninvolved in Saul’s death. Such a reconstruction represents an alternative political history, in which the kingdom of Judah was not formed when the monarchy divided after the death of Solomon. The idea of a split kingdom under Rehoboam (Judah) and Jeroboam (Israel) represents an attempt to integrate HDR and HSR and enable refugees from the kingdom of Israel destroyed by the Assyrians to identify as citizens of Judah.

Subsequent discussions build upon this reconstructed political history. In Chapter 4, the border city of Keilah, originally portrayed in HDR as belonging to Judah and loyally supporting David, is later vilified along with the clan of the Ziphites for treachery, thereby disassociating them from Judah. The project of combining HDR and HSR to generate Israelite belonging to Judah does not necessarily entail an endorsement of kingship and the state *per se*. For example, the stories of Uriah the Hittite (Chapter 6) and Ittai the Gittite (Chapter 7) represent the theoretical possibility of duty to state and nation being displaced by devotion to the king. The biblical authors, contends Wright, anticipate modernity by criticizing David as a tyrant who subverts the political principle that the state (or its ruler) is not an end in itself but a means of protecting and providing justice to the nation.

By the time we reach Chronicles, the political landscape has changed from a strong national identity and weak centralization to a weakened sense of nationhood and strong centralization. David now becomes a rallying point for a “Pan-Israelite” ideology (Chapter 10) resulting from centuries of territorial conflict (Chapter 9). Thus, Chronicles overlooks the negative stories about David (Bathsheba, Absalom, Sheba ben Bichri) in

order to sanctify him, but promotes an ideology of national unity centered on David and the temple. “War commemoration” is replaced by “temple building commemoration” whose contributors assume their proper membership in the people of Israel, not the state of Judah. Wright introduces the figure of Caleb as a warlord similar to David, but also a rival for the position of “Judah’s greatest hero” (207). Although constructed as an Israelite, he and the Calebites may have had a more fluid identity; while Calebite traditions may have been appropriated by Judahites to account for Calebite control over a major Judean center (Hebron), they also reflect resistance to state centralization.

The book represents a valuable contribution to biblical scholarship. Many of Wright’s claims, however, require nuance. For example, his claim that Judah was originally a separate kingdom plausibly correlates with a need to invent a narrative about a United Kingdom divided in order to address the 8th–7th century reality of Israelite refugees in Judah. It also, however, corresponds to the alternative possibility that the United Kingdom was in fact redivided with a preexistent kingdom of Judah as a partial catalyst. For another example, Wright describes the richly human portrayal of David as radical because, contrary to ancient conventions, “monarchs are to be represented as stoic, immutable, super-human sovereigns” (11). While this may apply to Near Eastern literature, it does not apply to contemporary Greek works. The non-apologetic character of the Davidic narratives is reflected even in Ecclesiasticus (47:11), which recognizes that David had sins requiring forgiveness. Joel Rosenberg has read the Davidic narratives critically and politically as reflecting a “connection between the family intrigues of Israel’s leaders ... and the larger history of Israel’s moral and political institutions ...” (*King and King: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible*, 108). Similarly overdetermined is the category of “war commemoration,” which receives a very broad definition that includes not only the Song of Deborah but also the Letter of Aristeas. While significant, it is hard to accept that “war itself is less determinative for the formation of national identities than war *commemoration*” (21). The discussion of Boston’s Robert Gould Shaw sculpture provides an excellent example of a war memorial, but it is unclear what is to be gained by fitting the story of the spies and the narrative about Absalom into this narrow category (the tale of Absalom “evolved ... into a complex literary war memorial,” 117), as opposed to simply characterizing them as commemorations or “biblical memory.” After all, Wright correctly shows that narratives about priests and building projects

perform the same functions as war memorials and indicate degrees of belonging to political institutions (120–122 and 159–162).

While a more precise definition of war commemoration would have been helpful, this does not detract from Wright's central claim that selected pericopes from Samuel, Kings and Chronicles reflect political notions about nation, state, identity and belonging. Moreover, he gives important attention to the way in which political issues specific to Judah are addressed in the biblical texts. This makes sense since the annals of the predominant Northern Kingdom of Israel have been mediated through Judean textual traditions. Also convincing are his observations that genealogies confirm political status and the marginality of border towns foster commemorations addressing belonging. And Wright astutely notes that David, as the youngest of eight sons with little prospects of inheritance, had a compelling incentive to create for himself the kingdom of Judah through cunning ruthlessness. This engaging and well-written book contributes significantly to our understanding of the political dimensions of the formation and content of the David and Caleb narratives and will deservedly take its place in future scholarship on David and biblical politics.

***Religious Conversions in the Mediterranean World.* Edited by Nadia Marzouki and Olivier Roy. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, £54.62 Paper**

doi:10.1017/S1755048315000772

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For many years, conversion has served as a distinctly political tool. Through mass conversions — usually involving the use of force and violence — many leaders strengthened their governmental hegemony, which was based on unity of religious and political affiliation. In our times too, conversions on a huge scale are taking place — in South America (from Catholicism to Protestantism); in Europe (to Islam, or from Islam to Christianity); while in the United States there are continuous transitions between various religions in fairly large numbers. Do these conversions