

## Review of Daniel Bodi, *The Demise of the Warlord: A New Look at the David Story*. Hebrew Bible Monographs, 26. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010.

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This is a “new look” at the David and Bathsheba story in 2 Samuel 11-12 and not at the entire David story in Samuel-Kings. Bodi bases his new look on the assumption that Saul and David were preceded by a tribal, nomadic period when the tribes were ruled by chieftains. Saul and David represent not the rise of monarchy, but the sedentarisation of the nomadic tribes and their chieftains. Bodi privileges the titles warlord or tribal chieftain over king. To clarify the process of tribal sedentarisation in general and in particular in the David and Bathsheba story, Bodi turns to Akkadian letters from Mari and El-Amarna that derive from the early and late 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE respectively.

In these letters we see nomadic tribes and their chieftains in the process of settling down and adopting some forms of a sedentary lifestyle. The parallels “provide an extremely helpful and needed cultural, linguistic and ideological background for the understanding of the ancient Hebrew nomadic tribes and their chieftains” (p. 1). Bodi assumes that this story of Hebrew tribes settling down describes an actual historical process and says little in its defense despite the many historians who significantly qualify, or simply reject, it. From the outset of his project there is then this troubling question of history and historical process. For me his arguments for historical parallels in literary topoi between Hebrew narrative and documents from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia are weak at best. However these historical assumptions and assertions are only part of Bodi’s book and I will focus my review on the contents of his work with comments on the historical points where necessary.

His first chapter surveys previous study, both historical-critical and narratological, of 2 Samuel 11-12. Chapters 2-3 are his 80 page “commentary” on the historical, linguistic and narratological aspects of the story. His translation of the text includes a large number of Hebrew transliterations of specific words and phrases that are important for his study. He divides the story into two parts: David, Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Samuel 11) and Nathan and David (2 Samuel 12) and then subdivides each into 3 acts with 2 scenes per act. In his commentary he proceeds verse-by-verse and the focus and contents of the commentary are quite diverse. There is no consistency in what is commented on, in how extensive a discussion of a passage or issue may be, or in what comprises the comments.

Bodi has interesting insights into the structure and workings of 2 Samuel 11-12 including the verbal interplay between the two parts. This straightforward treatment of the story is frequently interrupted, however, by lengthy asides on a wide variety of issues that often have little to do with the overall thrust of his reading. For example, he discusses at length (pp 28-33) whether “the turn of the year” in 2 Sam 11:1 is in the spring or the fall and leaves the question open. There is a digression on pp. 56-60 on adultery and its punishments; only a small portion of this is applied to the David and Bathsheba episode. Finally, there are briefer asides on narrative and historical issues such as the size and population of 10<sup>th</sup> century Jerusalem, openings such as doors, windows, and wombs, the Sumerian Sargon Legend (pp. 67-68) that includes the topos of a person bearing a letter that contains his own death sentence, and the treatment of harems by rival chieftains (pp. 79-91).

Throughout his commentary, and throughout the rest of his book, Bodi mixes in a large number of extra-biblical parallels drawn from a wide range in time, from the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE to the time of the Talmud and Midrashim, and an equally wide range of content including letters, legendary stories, monumental inscriptions, laws, and commentary. Perusal of his Index of References, pp. 256-265, quickly reveals the range of the texts cited. While these extra-biblical parallels and the many asides may often be insightful in themselves, they are not integrated into a consistent treatment of the overall story.

Chapter 4 – “An Akkadian Literary *Topos*: The Bedouin Ideal of the Warlike Existence” – is one of the novelties of this monograph. Reading two Mari letters and a 9<sup>th</sup> century Neo-Babylonian work, *The Poem of Erra*, Bodi identifies a *topos* of the tribal warlord: “According to this warrior ideology, dallying with women, eating, drinking and living in the shade instead of leading armies into military exploits is considered unworthy of a warlord and disparaging to his reputation” (p. 2). This *topos* is the narrative and historical basis of the condemnation of David in 2 Samuel 11-12.

He provides the Akkadian text of the two letters and of the relevant parts of *Erra* with translations. Both the original text and the translation are accompanied by abundant grammatical and philological notes. There is a wealth of information here far beyond the aims of his study. The first Mari letter, titled *La vie nomade* by its editor, is from one warlord to another. The former “extols his own warrior habits and outdoor, active life-style, leading and marching in front of his troops” (p. 108) while accusing the latter, in striking, physical sexual metaphors, of spending his time between women’s legs and not at the front of his troops. The second letter is from the Assyrian king Šamši-Addu I to his son Yasmaḥ-Addu who rules in Mari. He is “indolent and slothful,” given to elaborate expenditures and spends far too much time “lying among women” (p. 115). Rather he should act “in a virile, military manner as a true warlord at the head of the army he is about to lead” (p. 122).

*The Poem of Erra* concerns this god of war who must be roused from a bout of lovemaking and from a way of life also termed “slothful and indolent” (p. 124). One of his captains drags Erra from his bed and challenges him to go to war by reciting a “Warrior’s Manifesto”: a warrior’s commitment to violence and carnage, a fuller and bloodier version of the descriptions in the Mari letters. Bodi summarises:

These ancient Amorite texts attest to a particularity of the warriors’ world based on male bonding which is perpetuated even in modern-day military milieu –the preference for “macho” language and raunchy metaphors ... In the world of the Amorite and Israelite nomadic chieftains, in order to be a warlord leading his people and troops into battle, one had to possess certain virile qualities (p. 110).

He supports his interpretation with brief discussions of passages from the *Epic of Zimri-Lim* and of a Middle Assyrian incantation for a difficult childbirth.

Bodi certainly demonstrates that his literary *topos* of the warrior and the rhetoric against indolence and in favour of manly valor and violence is in evidence in the ancient Near East at least from the early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE up to the “modern-day military.” His texts and discussion add much in detail to a reading of the David and Bathsheba story but, as I said earlier, say nothing decisive about the historicity and historical setting of the tale.

This is the midpoint of Bodi’s book. There are five more chapters including the brief conclusion in chapter 9. If anything Bodi’s content in these chapters is even more disparate and too often has little relevance to the biblical narrative. Chapter 5 (pp. 138-156) is a brief history of Mari and the Amorites and a good example of lack of relevance. Chapter 6 (pp. 157-191) argues that Uriah is a resident alien and that David’s crime against him is paralleled in Amarna Letter 162, in which an Egyptian official is charged with attacking a resident alien and is sentenced to death. Chapter 7 (pp. 192-211)

discusses the principle of retributive justice in the Hebrew Bible, tracing parallels from second into late first millennium texts. Chapter 8 (pp. 212-224) parallels a Talmudic rule that a warrior should give his wife a divorce letter before going to war so that she could easily remarry if he died or were taken prisoner. Bodi finds a distant parallel in the Middle Assyrian laws of the 12<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. This is a fanciful but interesting reading that, again, has little to do with Uriah and Bathsheba.

This is a book that a scholar might consult for comments on and discussion of one or more of the many texts and issues, both biblical and extra-biblical, that Bodi addresses in this rambling work. But it is not a book to be read straight through for a “new look at the David story.”



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