

2013

Book Review: The Surprising Election and Confirmation of King David

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Recommended Citation

Nam, Roger S., "Book Review: The Surprising Election and Confirmation of King David" (2013). *Faculty Publications - Portland Seminary*. 118.

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The Surprising Election and Confirmation of King David. By J. Randall Short. Cambridge: Harvard Theological Studies, 2010. Pp. x + 244.

In this revised Th.D. dissertation (Harvard Divinity School, 2006), Randall Short challenges the interpretation of the History of David's Rise (1 Sam. 16-2 Sam. 5; hereafter = HDR) as political apology in the style of the "Hittite Apology of Ḫattušili." Instead, Short argues that both the wider literary context and individual elements support HDR as a testimony to the surprising and wondrous character of ḲḲḲḲ in the unlikely selection of David as his chosen one.

Chapter One presents research assumptions and the intellectual history behind the identification of HDR as an independent political apology created to justify the ascension of David. Short rehearses the arguments of a group of scholars (primarily P. Kyle McCarter, but also Michael B. Dick, Harry A. Hoffner, Steven L. McKenzie, Herbert M. Wolf, and others), who claim overarching rhetorical themes in both the Hittite and biblical texts, thereby conferring their common genre. Through these themes, McCarter isolates specific charges against David that HDR attempts to address: David's lack of loyalty, his outlaw status, and his guilt in the death of Saul and his supporters. Short argues that such an interpretation is restrictive to a tenth-century Davidic setting for HDR. Though he does not deny the plausibility of such a social origin, Short points to the circularity of allowing this purported historical setting to drive interpretation of HDR as political apology.

Chapter Two reappraises some of the main points of comparison between the Apology of Ḫattušili and HDR. Aforementioned scholars assert the thematic commonalities in both texts, such as early military success and favor with the reigning royal family. But Short suggests that a closer examination reveals several points of divergence which have been largely ignored. Most notably, the kingly lineage of Ḫattušili contrasts with David's more humble origins. Other characteristics of the Hittite text may appear more congruent with the biblical text, though Short counters that even these details diverge significantly. For example, while the Hittite royal apology element of "Unworthy Predecessor" seems to fit the biblical text, a careful reading shows that this element does not correspond well with the more ambiguous assessment of good and evil in Saul within HDR.

Chapter Three introduces speech-act theory as a methodological control over the interpretations of HDR. One of the benefits of speech-act theory is the allowance of multiple illocutions within a single locutionary statement. For HDR, the identification of the illocution as political apology is merely one possible interpretation among many. More importantly, the illocution of political apology largely depends on elusive historical considerations. Short states, "The interpretive key for McCarter (along with others I have cited) comes from critical assumptions about the historical reconstruction of the events behind HDR" (107). Short then argues for the possibility of additional illocutionary and perlocutionary forces, "It is conceivable, for instance, that one of the perlocutionary aims was that ḲḲḲḲ should receive credit and honor for the mysterious way in which He confirmed His rejection of Saul and election of

David as king of his people" (109). Short contends that this interpretation better fits the natural progression of the narrative.

The remainder of the book further unpacks this theological emphasis on YHWH's surprising and wondrous nature with the covenant community. Chapter Four presents 1 Sam 5-16 as a consistent display of a divinely rejected Saul and elected David so that the reader does not need any additional exoneration. The text redundantly expresses YHWH as finding, choosing and providing David as the king. Chapter Five argues that 1 Sam. 16-2 Sam. 5 serves as a "Manifestation and confirmation of YHWH's prior and immediate election of David" (145). The narrative culminates with the eternal covenant of 2 Sam. 7, which provides a meta-frame for the entire HDR. More than political apology, Short insists that the text continually asserts and re-asserts the character of YHWH through the movement of David.

Short has written a commendable book in many respects. He is theological in orientation, and he reaches his conclusions with historical-critical awareness and philological sophistication. His attention to these diachronic details does not detract him from wider observations on the larger narrative of HDR. For example, Short presents a nice discussion over the progressive revelation of David as an anointed one, first to Samuel, then to the elders, to the men and women of Israel, to Saul's household and, ultimately, to Saul himself (179-91). Short uses these observations to further support the aspects of wonder and surprise of YHWH, the anointer and the revealer. Overall, Short makes a strong case for a neglected viewpoint to HDR, namely as it relates to its theological presentation of YHWH.

Such a perspective forces us to reassess some of the longstanding debates regarding historical studies and theological enterprise. In reading Short's treatment of HDR, I question whether the monograph unnecessarily upholds a bifurcation between the putative ancient genre of political apology and the theological nature of the text. In other words, does the identification of HDR as a political apology encroach upon its theological message? A cursory glance at contemporary royal inscriptions suggests otherwise. In fact, most ancient Near Eastern political apologies defend their own royal legitimacy within a theological framework by appealing to the favor of the deities. In addition, although HDR does not perfectly align with the outline of the Hittite Royal Apology, it does not eliminate the potential analogy. For example, Short argues that HDR emphasizes the lack of royal background of David. But, in fact, the *Nabopolassar Cylinder*, a Neo-Babylonian royal inscription, gives a similarly humble assessment for the king, "When I was young, although the son of a nobody" (COS 2.121, i.7). Short emphatically stresses the interlocution of YHWH's theological wonder and surprise as the dominant reading over the interlocution of political apology. I would suggest that both interlocutions are not mutually exclusive, but rather integrative.

Regardless, Short provides an outstanding treatment of HDR. The volume critically challenges accepted historical-critical notions while invoking new theological observations. All things considered, Short presents a worthy contribution to the scholarly discussion on HDR.

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