

David in Genesis

Genesis Criticizes David

The article by Gary Rendsburg ("Reading David in Genesis," **BR** 17:01) ascribing the authorship of the narratives in Genesis to someone in the court of King David is surely interesting but seems to be fatally flawed. Genesis is permeated with references to events not only occurring during the times of David and Solomon but also during those of others, including Ahab, Elijah, Elisha, Amaziah and Jehoash, as well as during the days of the Judges who preceded these monarchs, including Samson and Jephthah. The fact that Genesis alludes to protagonists who come after the division of the monarchy is a strong argument against any ascription of its authorship to a contemporary of King David.

For example, in the Joseph narrative the Torah says: "And he [Joseph] carried *mas'ot* [portions] from his presence to them and *mas'eyt* [the portion] of Benjamin was five times more than the *mas'ot* of all the rest" (Genesis 43:34).

The word *mas'eyt* characteristically denotes an offering to God or to a king (2 Samuel 11:8; Ezekiel 20:40; Psalm 141:2; 2 Chronicles 24:6, 9), so that its use in this verse shows that Joseph is honoring his brothers as rulers in their own right.

The word *mas'eyt* also appears in the narrative in which David deceives Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba: "And David said to Uriah: Go down to your house and wash your feet. And Uriah left the king's house and after him followed *mas'eyt* [a portion] from the king" (2 Samuel 11:8).

When Joseph gives Benjamin an extra portion before setting a trap for him and potentially condemning him to lifelong slavery on a trumped-up charge of theft, he acts in contrast to the way that David gives Uriah a portion before arranging for him to be killed on the battlefield.

David conspires with Joab to have Uriah killed: "And in the morning David wrote a note to Joab and sent it by Uriah's hand, and he wrote in the note saying: Place Uriah in front of the fierce battle and withdraw behind him so that he shall be struck and die" (2 Samuel 11:15).

David's tactics ominously echo those of Joseph, who instructs his steward to plant the royal goblet in Benjamin's sack, which

might have led to Benjamin's enslavement. Joseph, unlike David, does not intend to carry out fully his cruel game.

By linking the narrative describing Joseph's feigned and unsuccessful attempt to enslave Benjamin with David's unfeigned and successful attempt to kill Uriah, the author of Genesis contrasts the compassion of the ancestor of Jeroboam, the Ephraimite descendant of Joseph who was first king of the northern kingdom of Israel after the division of the united monarchy ruled by David and Solomon, with the cynical heartlessness of David. Such an oblique criticism of David in combination with a favorable view of the Josephite ruler of the northern kingdom shows a bias towards the northern kingdom. Such a story would hardly have been written before the division of the monarchy.

*Gershon Hepner
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Gary Rendsburg responds:

To some extent, Mr. Hepner's method and mine are consonant with one another. We both look to events from the monarchic period to serve as the background for the stories in Genesis. The difference is that I see the tenth century B.C.E. as the background for Genesis, while Mr. Hepner sees a later period for its setting. He believes that the positive portrayal of Joseph in Genesis "shows a bias towards the northern kingdom." Such a bias, I must assume, would come from the pen of a northern author. But the linguistic evidence does not reflect this. My studies in regional dialects of ancient Hebrew reveal a dichotomy between Israelite, or northern, Hebrew, and Judahite, or southern, Hebrew. The Joseph story lacks a concentration of Israelite Hebrew lexical and grammatical elements; rather, it is written in standard biblical Hebrew (= Judahite Hebrew) and therefore must be considered a Judahite composition. It is hard to imagine a Judahite author presenting Joseph in such a positive light after the split in the kingdom.

I would argue that the positive portrayal of Joseph in a story composed in Judahite Hebrew demonstrates that the story also must date to the tenth century B.C.E. Note that Judah is portrayed in a noble fashion within the Joseph story, in particular in his long speech in Genesis 44:18-34 (17 verses—the longest in the book of Genesis), which moves Joseph to tears and leads him to reveal himself to his brothers.

Was Bathsheba Behind It?

Thank you for the February 2001 **BR**. Both Gary Rendsburg and Shlomith Yaron ("Sperm Stealing," **BR** 17:01) demonstrate that some stories in the Torah point, in different ways, towards King David. Central to both Rendsburg's and Yaron's arguments is the story of Judah and Tamar. Yaron discusses the sympathetic portrayals of four women, in three separate incidents, who initiate the reproductive act and bear sons. Three of the resulting sons are ancestors of David. Yaron left Bathsheba out of her discussion, but a case can be made that Bathsheba was also a woman who initiated the reproductive act and bore a son. If this is the case, then Yaron's stories do not point towards David, but rather towards his and Bathsheba's son, Solomon.

Rendsburg argues that the Torah was written at the time of David and may have been commissioned by his court. For Rendsburg, Judah and Tamar are stand-ins for David and Bathsheba. The theme of the Judah and Tamar story is not especially flattering towards Judah/David. Who might have written this section of Genesis and why? Tamar was a woman who dressed like a whore and acted like a whore but was not really a whore. She was a woman accused of adultery and condemned to death by Judah, but in the end Judah admitted that she was more righteous than he. Who had the most to gain from this version of media spin? At the time of David, who was it that dressed (or rather undressed) like a whore and, like Tamar, became pregnant while apart from her husband? None other than Bathsheba. Genesis 38 could be Bathsheba's response to the accusation of being an adulterous whore.

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Gary Rendsburg responds:

It is noteworthy that 2 Samuel 11-12 never points the finger at Bathsheba. She serves in the story as an agent, an individual necessary for the plot, but not as a full-fledged character. Note that we are given very little, if any, information about Bathsheba's emotions and that only David is accused of adultery. She is given only two words (in the Hebrew) to speak, "I am pregnant" (2 Samuel 11:5); and she is not called by her name from the time she is introduced until the entire affair is over. All of this means that the author of 2 Samuel 11-12 was not concerned with Bathsheba but rather sought to focus the reader's attention on David.

Now in real life Bathsheba may have been viewed negatively by people in the city of Jerusalem—we have no way of knowing—but the biblical account gives no indication whatsoever that she was accused of being "an adulterous whore" (Mr. Errick's words).

In general I am opposed to the effort to attribute a particular composition in the Bible to a specific character, named or unnamed, in the Bible. With the exception of the literary prophets, for whom we have names, the biblical books are anonymous. Scholars in recent times have attempted to ascribe the book of Deuteronomy to Jeremiah, the so-called Yahwist source to a royal lady in the court of Rehoboam, and so on. But such efforts can never be proved and should, I believe, be avoided.