

○ REVIEW OF DANIEL BODI, *THE MICHAL AFFAIR*

Peter D Miscall

Denver, CO 80223

Correspondence to Peter D Miscall: docmiscall@aol.com

Peter Miscall reviews *The Michal Affair: From Zimri-Lim to the Rabbis* by Daniel Bodi (in collaboration with Brigitte Donnet-Guez). Hebrew Bible Monographs, 3. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005.

Bodi starts with the collection of essays *Telling Queen Michal's Story*¹ that does not reflect concern with the role that the Michal story plays in the incisive critique of the institution of the monarchy. Saul and David, the founders of monarchy, are power hungry and willing to use any means, including murder, to further their ends. Michal, caught in the brutal power struggle between father and husband, highlights the cruelty of the struggle that can consume all those involved directly and indirectly. Bodi comments that it is remarkable in both biblical and ANE literature that a woman's story should play such a role in the critique of monarchy.

Bodi analyses the six episodes of the Michal story with a view to their literary, political and historical significance. He is of divided mind as to whether these episodes originally formed an independent narrative or are an integral part of the larger narrative. His book comprises three parts: 'A Political Reading of the Michal Story: The Tragedy of Michal as a Critique of the Israelite Monarchy and the Prefiguration of its End', 'The Daughters of Saul and the Daughters of Zimri-Lim' and 'Michal in Rabbinic Literature'.

The six fragments of Michal's story are:

1. Michal's Love for and Marriage to David (1 Sam 18.20-28)
2. Michal Saves David's Life (1 Sam 19.10d-18a)
3. Michal Married to Another Man (1 Sam 25.42-45)
4. Michal Brought Back to David (2 Sam 3.12-16)
5. The Rupture in the Relationship between Michal and David (2 Sam 6.16-23 + 1 Chron 15.29)
6. The Massacre of Michal's Five Sons (2 Sam 21.8-9)

His readings pay close attention to literary structure, context and details. He engages with commentaries and studies on the material that both support and disagree with his analyses and he consistently invokes a wide range of ANE material, from Egypt to Mesopotamia, to clarify and expand on the biblical texts. The parallels involve individual words, phrases and political situations.

I cite two examples from the first episode; the examples also relate to Bodi's frequent discussion of individual words and phrases relevant to the passage under discussion. Michal's 'love' (*hb*) for David frames the episode and it is in the context of others' love for him: Saul (1 Sam 16:21), Jonathan (18:3) and all Israel and Judah (18:16). Love entails both human emotion and political allegiance and the double entendre is crucial to Bodi's reading. The political machinations of the two kings exploit the emotions and the relationships of those around them. The personal, the emotional and the familial are all part of the political in a monarchy. And the tragic outcome of Michal's love foreshadows the doom of the monarchy. In explicating this double meaning of

love, Bodi cites biblical and extrabiblical parallels including the Amarna letters and Assyrian vassal treaties.

When Saul is informed that Michal loves David, ‘the thing was right [yšr] in his eyes’, and the same when David is told of Saul’s offer of Michal’s hand: ‘the thing was right [yšr] in David’s eyes’ (18:20, 26). Bodi develops the ironic use of the root *yšr* that as a verb means to be right or just and as a noun refers to one who trusts in YHWH. In 1 Samuel 18 it reflects Saul’s murderous intent and David’s political aspirations. In addition *yšr* expresses a main duty of a king, the establishment of justice. Bodi cites parallels from Hammurabi and other Mesopotamian kings who speak of establishing justice (*misharam*) in their lands. He also cites Egyptian *ma’at*, truth, as a central duty of the Pharaoh.

Bodi is not original in citing these parallels, but his work is impressive in the number and range of ANE texts that he brings to bear upon a biblical passage. The texts include *inter alia* narratives, royal inscriptions and collections of laws. He quotes the relevant parts in his main text and does not relegate them to footnotes. Reading these familiar biblical texts in light of all the parallels strongly impresses on this reader that the Hebrew Bible is part of ANE literature and not a work *sui generis*.

The final rupture between Michal and David in 2 Samuel 6 is another foreshadowing of the collapse of the monarchy; there will be no heir to combine the two royal houses and bring stability. In his detailed discussion of the story, Bodi includes the possibility that Michal’s stinging censure of David represents a proper Yahwism shocked at the Canaanite fertility rites reflected in his wild dancing and sacrifices. True to his approach Bodi cites other studies and ANE texts to support his contention.

He continues the Canaanite rite theme with the final episode, the execution of Michal’s five sons among others in 2 Samuel 21. The executions are a sacrifice to lift the deadly famine. Rizpah, by keeping birds from the corpses, refuses to abide by the Canaanite rules. Bodi stays with the MT that has Michal married to Adriel, Merab’s husband in 1 Samuel 18. He recognises that his reading doesn’t solve all the issues with the text. He cites the near equation of Michal and Merab as an *inclusio* for the entire Michal tale since they are both offered to David as wives at the very start. The death of her sons is the final note in her tragic story.

The Mari Royal Archives of the eighteenth century BCE contain a large number of letters from and about the daughters of Zimri-Lim, a Mari king at a time of chronic unrest and shifting alliances. He married two of his daughters, Šimtum (elder) and Kirûm (younger), to a vassal Haya-Smû. The marriages would help cement the alliance and the daughters would serve as spies for Zimri-Lim. Šimtum would not go along with her father’s political scheming but Kirûm did. Haya-Smû realised Zimri-Lim’s ulterior motives; apparently he trusted Šimtum but not her sister whom he isolated. Kirûm eventually divorced and returned to her father. Bodi goes into detail on the issues of marriage gifts and a woman’s right to divorce and develops the parallels with Saul’s use of his daughters at length. The parallels are evidence for the originality of the offer of both daughters against the proposal that the offer of Merab is a later doublet of the offer of Michal. They are also evidence for the historicity of the marital machinations between Saul and David. For me the parallels point to the realistic strength of the storyteller whose tales are not fantastic or mythic and again anchor him firmly in an ANE setting.

Bodi’s third chapter reviews a large range of rabbinic interpretations derived from the Talmud and midrashim. (The relevant texts were gathered and translated by his student Brigitte Donnet-

Guez.) Since the rabbis read the biblical text closely and from their own point of view, the many cited passages reveal insight into the Michal story and into the rabbinic culture. They evince a great concern with the legality of the marriages involving David, Merab, Michal and Palti applying rules from both the Bible and their own tradition. The rabbis do deal with David's ambitious and self-seeking side, but their main focus is on keeping him 'clean'. For example they turn Palti into a hero who abstains from sex with Michal; the unconsummated union helps legitimate David's taking Michal back. Michal, depending on whether she is helping or hindering David, appears as a wonderful or a vile wife. She is variously seen as extremely beautiful, strong-willed and quite pious; in some texts she even wears the phylacteries and studies Torah.

In the conclusion Bodi claims that the millennia of rabbinic interpretation support his focus, through the Michal story, on David's abiding guilt in the Samuel narrative and on the thorough critique of the monarchy. This does not follow from his presentation and discussion of the many relevant passages in rabbinic materials. They do reveal much about the process of interpretation, the play and tension between text and interpreter evident in the rabbinic texts, but do not 'prove' the correctness of one interpretation. The rabbinic material is fascinating, but the rabbis are far too rich and multifaceted in their readings to be used to support only one reading. On the other hand, Bodi's reading of the Michal story in its Samuel context is thorough, solid and well supported with biblical and extrabiblical texts and does not need later readings to support or 'prove' it.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ D.J.A. Clines and T.C. Eskenazi (eds.), *Telling Queen Michal's Story: An Experiment in Comparative Interpretation*. JSOTSup, 119; Sheffield: JSOT Press; 1991.