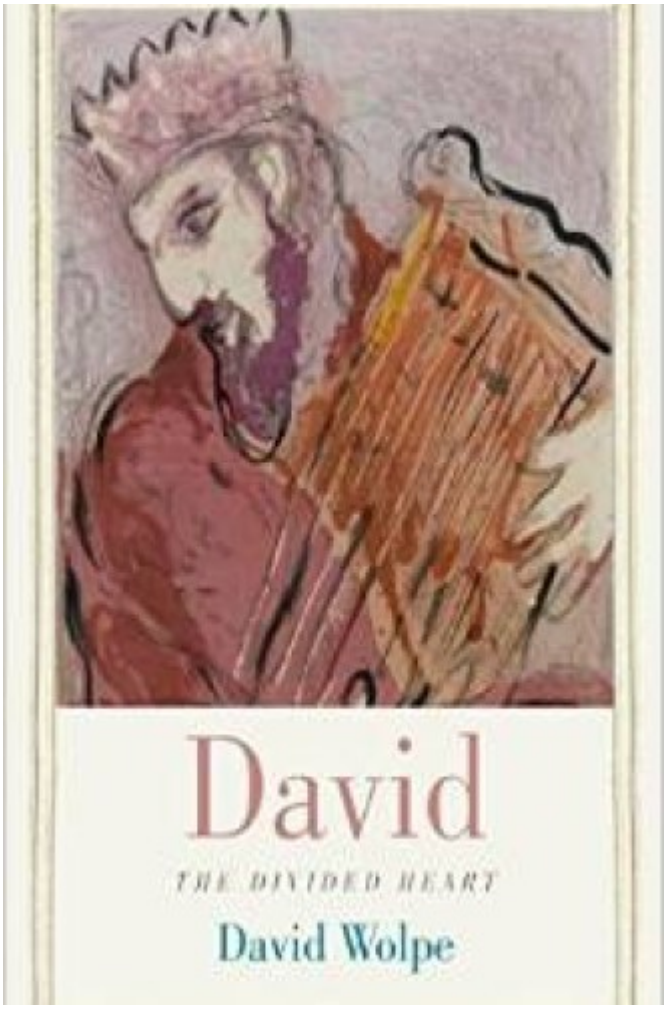
David: The Divided Heart, by David Wolpe

reviewed by Walter Brueggemann in the October 15, 2014 issue

In Review



David

By David Wolpe
Yale University Press

There is at present a stream of good and interesting books on the Hebrew Bible's King David, written by first-rate scholars. These books variously address historical and sociological questions concerning the rise of the monarchy in ancient Israel, but

they tend to find most interesting the artistic offer of the narrative presentation. In his welcome, accessible sketch of David, Rabbi David Wolpe of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles takes into account this stream of critical study, but goes his own inventive way in his articulation.

When I first received Wolpe's book, I gave it a quick read. It seemed to me simply a thoughtful retelling of the David narrative, and I wondered how I would find enough to say for a review. But then I remembered that any rabbinic offering is entitled to a slow read, because the way of textual commentary that is readily associated with a rabbinic presentation is patient; with great attention to detail, it savors words and teases with images and analogues. As a result of my slow read, I have come to great appreciation of the book in its deceptive simplicity, and I have learned more about David and a great deal about reading texts carefully.

Wolpe's book is a thoughtful, reflective exploration of the various roles in which David is cast in the narrative. In his account of the young David, Wolpe considers the fact that "God instructs Samuel to lie" in the process of anointing David to be a harbinger of the guile that is to come in the narrative that follows. He sees that David "makes things new," "conjuring solutions and possibilities from the void." David cleverly defeats Goliath (whose sword is the "ancient analogue of Babe Ruth's bat"), manages a flight from Saul to power, and shifts deftly from nomadic existence to envision a permanent temple. It is such newness that marks him as a man of God.

As lover and husband, David exhibits a divided heart. But, Wolpe writes, "to speak of a conflicted heart is simply to speak of a human heart":

> A poet, a musician, a multiply married man, he understood the tropes and obligations of attachment, and with his wives as with his children, as we shall see, the closeness to others determined his destiny even as it divided his heart.

In his discussion of David as fugitive, Wolpe traces David alongside Jonathan, face-to-face with Saul, and seemingly trapped beyond escape with the Philistines. Wolpe judges of these "cliffhanger" narratives: "What none of these commentators doubted was that the human events were reflective of a divine plan—Saul had to die so that David could become king." But that divine resolve is firmly situated in sordid human company: "We can only imagine the collection of loyalists, bandits, ruffians, and perhaps ecstatics who have collected around this charismatic man."

When this David becomes king, Wolpe notes, many of his enemies are conveniently eliminated, while he maintains his “plausible deniability”:

> For some readers the whiff of convenience has become the stench of conspiracy. . . . The Tanach goes to a great deal of trouble to insist that David was blameless. . . . Still, the attempt to turn David into a Machiavellian thoroughbred does violence to the complexity of his character. There are shades of David’s soul we have not yet seen.

David the king is a model of both “equanimity and ruthlessness.”

But things soon fall apart for the king, who becomes a sinner. David remains in the city in the season of war. “Perhaps he wants to run his good fortune through his fingers like the gold coins of the legend,” Wolpe writes, then traces the cover-up concerning the death of Uriah and terms Nathan’s rebuke of David “a hinge of history.” Remarkably the king does not kill the prophet who indicts him: “What Nathan punctures in parable is not only David’s dormant conscience, but his self-deceptions and rationalizations.” It is, for the king, all about deception, complexity, and contradiction.

David as father is a narrative “in which brothers are entangled in jealousy and repentance, hatred and near-fratricide.” Wolpe nicely mentions that the Septuagint and a Qumran text (as is reflected in the NRSV) add a phrase concerning David’s response to Absalom: “But he loved him.” Wolpe adds, “If it was added later, the author might be looking to explicitly declare this baffling man capable of love.” The ambiguity of David concerning Absalom—a rebel he must resist, the son he wants to save—shows that “David’s divided heart is a leitmotif of his personality.” This subtle, clever, manipulative man is nonetheless capable of being deceived:

> A different attempt to explain David’s blindness to brewing insurrection involves his susceptibility to deception. Remember that David was deceived by Nathan’s parable. . . . He was deceived by the woman of Tekoa. . . . He was deceived by permitting Tamar to go to her brother and rapist Amnon, and by permitting Amnon to go to sheep shearing with Absalom. . . . Sometimes the deceiver is oblivious to the power of others to deceive.

At the end, David is a pitiful caretaker with “no more battles to win, rebellions to quell, women to woo.” In his helplessness at the end his life he is like all who die: “When one is dying, he is neither king, nor doctor, nor priest, just a frail and fading

man.”

The book finishes with a reflection on how it is that David could be in the lineage of the Messiah who is to come. He fits in as an ancestor, Wolpe judges, “precisely because of his weaknesses, his transgressions, his artifices, his divided heart.” David has that godlike quality “for good or for evil.” “Perhaps David is the forerunner of the Messiah because this is the man who enacts what God wishes—in his sinfulness and sublimity, he is the most human of us all.”

I have quoted this lovely book multiple times because its power is in its artistry, through which Wolpe lets us see how a storytelling imagination makes this remembered David a palpable contemporary for us. There is in this book a clear gain for our understanding of David. But there are for me two other important takeaways. First, Wolpe is fully informed about critical issues in the text. He quietly acknowledges them but does not linger over them, instead moving on to generous postcritical interpretation. That surely is the way to read!

Second, the subtitle of the book, *The Divided Heart*, is crucial for this study. The author regularly notes the complexity and contradiction in David’s life. This artistically rendered narrative of honesty is a formidable refusal of Enlightenment notions of the achievement of human well-being through technical means (drugs, cosmetics, electronic connections, and a host of other commodities), as if the human person were a problem to be solved. This narrative discernment of human dividedness is from powerfully Jewish texts; it is no wonder that Freud and the entire legacy of psychoanalysis is compellingly Jewish. We keep reading these texts because they attest our humanness, which society wants to deny but cannot in the end forego. This is a David in the image of God—and some God! Wolpe’s *David* is an easy, fruitful read. But it must be done ever so slowly.