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Heroines, Heroes and Deity: Three Narratives of the Biblical Heroic Tradition

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DOLORES G. KAMRADA, *Heroines, Heroes and Deity: Three Narratives of the Biblical Heroic Tradition* (LHBOTS 621; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016). Pp. xxviii + 204. \$112.

This volume is a revised dissertation from the University of Vienna. Three portions of the book (about one-third) appeared previously in other volumes. This book is composed of five parts: “Introduction”; chap. 1, “The Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter”; chap. 2, “Hairy Samson: The Function of the Hair Motif in the Samson Cycle”; chap. 3, “Urim and Thummim – Saul and David”; and “Closing Reflections.” In addition, the volume includes a bibliography, an index of references (biblical and nonbiblical), and an index of authors.

The introduction briefly discusses the three narratives under consideration: Judg 11:29-40 (Jephthah’s daughter); Judges 13–16 (Samson), and 1 Samuel 1; 9–11; 13–14; 28; 31 (Saul). Each story is further analyzed in subsequent chapters. Kamrada looks at these texts as stories of individuals “in a military, heroic context” and representing the end of the “heroic age” of ancient Israel. The methodological approach draws heavily on “folk-taloring motifs” which she argues were known to the biblical authors as part of their

“cultural memory.” She acknowledges that the stories have multiple layers of editing and are products of a much later time than the periods they depict. Specifically, they ultimately reflect the hand of the Deuteronomistic Historian and his theology, but they are not from the postexilic period. The Deuteronomistic Historian’s theology is characterized by the presence of the divine spirit, extermination of enemies (*hērem*), and divination (often Urim and Thummim). Furthermore, all of the main characters in these stories reflect heroism: exceptional physical abilities, a desire for success, and self-consciousness of their status. All of this leads to their potential (and real) downfall. Through all of this, K. seeks to show how the stories have changed from “ritual coherence” (legendary stories of cultural memory) to “textual coherence” (the written text).

Chapter 2 deals with the story of Jephthah’s daughter. For K. this is a story borrowed from an earlier, “well-known” folk story and later adapted by the Deuteronomistic Historian. It is the story of a woman who sacrifices herself for the sake of the community and thus is a heroine. To support this, K. claims that the daughter knew about her father’s vow and thus died willingly to fulfill a “positive” *hērem*, which is accepted by Yhwh. Her death is thus not condemned by the authors since it is “self-sacrifice.” In addition, the daughter’s time away before her death (Judg 11:37-40) is claimed to be the basis of a female “pre-marital rite of passage” that became a ritual in the community. Jephthah himself is seen as being overly ambitious in war and politics and ends up childless as his punishment.

In the story of Samson, based on the folklore motif of the “wild man,” K. tries to “demonstrate the basic similarity to a presumed ‘original’ (folk) story” (p. 68). To support this she refers to stories about Heracles, Humbaba, and Asherah and to the Hungarian and Grimm brothers’ folktales. Samson is given a miraculous birth, takes on characteristics of a Nazirite, and is linked to Yhwh. When he loses his hair, he also loses his connection with Yhwh, although the link (divine spirit) is restored when his hair regrows. The chapter ends with K. seeking to build links between Samson and Jephthah’s daughter.

In chap. 3, K. seeks to connect Saul with Samson and Jephthah and then turns attention to the Urim and Thummim as vehicles of divination used in a “ritual context.” For K. it is a “binary” determination—yes or no: an Urim response means a curse; and a Thummim response means “without fault.” She then argues that the lack of a response from Yhwh (e.g., 1 Sam 14:37) should be understood as a no. The use of Urim and Thummim (or “lots”) however, also involves options with no sense of curse, such as in the selection of Saul as king (1 Sam 10:20-24). Furthermore, the withholding of Yhwh’s word can be the result of sin in the community and not a no (1 Sam 14:37-46). In the last part of the chapter, K. looks at the connections with folktales, including a “male Cinderella” from Grimm, material from Livy, and an “original” tale that had Saul getting a wife and a kingdom. It also discusses an understanding of Elohim as originally a “chthonic” god, based on the story in 1 Samuel 10.

In the final, very brief chapter, K. argues for “original myths” reflecting “cultural memory” that are used and adapted in these stories; connections among these three episodes as stories of an “ideal warrior” who experiences a downfall; and the end of the “classical age of heroes.” She argues that, although David is a hero, he is different and does not experience either the separation from Yhwh or a downfall like his predecessors.

The volume would have benefited from further editing. The connections between the chapters sometimes seem an afterthought. An example is the double discussion of Samson’s birth in chaps. 2 and 3. Further, there are several small lapses, such as the lack of a date for one bibliographic entry of Mobley and the difficult sentence at the bottom of p. 116.

More substantively, there is a problem with the continued claim that these stories rely on earlier folktales. That might be possible, but the evidence is sparse or lacking, especially when parallels are often from non-Israelite and later materials. It is therefore nearly impossible to see how the stories were changed if earlier versions are not extant. Another issue is the treatment of Saul. K. assumes that Saul’s story is relatively correct and that Saul was condemned by his own actions. Other scholars would argue that the negative portrayal of Saul is the result of the Deuteronomistic Historian’s manipulation of accounts (such as transferring the birth story to Samuel) to justify David’s ascension to the throne, and that Saul was actually a positive character unjustifiably condemned by later Judean editors who supported the “southern” David rather than the “northern” Saul. Finally, the claim that Saul ends the “heroic” period seems to ignore the military conquests of David and his physical attributes (cf. 1 Sam 16:12) and the expansion of the kingdom and building projects of Solomon.

This volume has three interesting aspects to its presentation: the continual connecting of biblical stories to folklore motifs; the argument that these three “hero” accounts are linked; and the idea that the Saul cycle ends the “heroic” period of ancient Israel. Each is worthy of consideration and further research.

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