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## VOLUME 9, ARTICLE 26

**JOHN VAN SETERS,  
A RESPONSE TO G. AICHELE, P. MISCALL AND  
R. WALSH, "AN ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM:  
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**PART I – MISREPRESENTATIONS HINDER DIALOGUE**

In a recent article by G. Aichele, P. Miscall and R. Walsh, “An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible” (*JBL* 128 [2009], pp. 383–404), the authors decried the lack of dialogue between those who practice historical criticism and the postmodernists, and they proposed, as postmodernists, to initiate a discussion. As a scholar who practices historical criticism for many years, I would like to respond to their invitation, by means of this personal rejoinder.

First, I would like to note that the authors are confident in assuming that the designation “historical criticism” is largely self-explanatory, while defining what exactly the term postmodernism entails is much more difficult. They suggest that a postmodernist is one who has moved beyond the rigors and limitations of modern historicism. According to them, postmodernism prides itself on its “diversity and anti-essentialism” which it shares with a wide range of philosophical or ideological perspectives from the nihilism of Nietzsche to the anti-rationalism of evangelical Christianity. However, what seems to define it most is that its practitioners have moved beyond their former training in (“modernist”) historical criticism, as if through a kind of intellectual conversion, and have now become *post*-modern.

Second, historical-critical and postmodernist approaches are not symmetrical partners for a conversation. The former are tantamount to a methodology, the latter “is characterized by diversity in both method and content” (p. 384) and therefore, it is not a method at all. Instead it represents a wide array of attitudes or stances that a scholar/reader may choose to take towards a text in the process of interpreting it. “What unites this methodological jumble is agreement that no final or essential interpretation of the text is

being produced ... [o]ther readings are always possible, and often invited" (p. 384).

To a large extent, and as already suggested by its name, postmodernism, can only be defined by what it is not and therefore would not exist without historical criticism (which postmodernist in the field associate with "modernism") as its essential other.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, historical criticism/methodology is not defined by what is not (i.e., postmodernism), and in fact, it does not require postmodernism as an "other" to understand itself.

The authors' call for a dialogue includes, for rhetorical purposes, a particular use of the category of myth. The simple understanding of "myth" is to regard it as a primitive, unscientific and unhistorical way of understanding reality, characteristic of the pre-modern world, which modern science and historical criticism attempted to change; and in this it was largely successful. Since the term "myth" usually connotes or evokes this meaning, it is so useful for rhetorical purposes. It is also true, that "myth" may be used to refer to an all-inclusive way of thinking about reality such that it includes everyone and every form of modern thought as well. It is in this sense that the authors use the term. The authors use the term "myth" for "the community's taken-for-granted common sense and the hermeneutic through which the community defines life, truth, rationality, and justice ... (m)yth is the metanarrative (and attendant perspective) that establishes and defends the communal status quo" (p. 388).<sup>2</sup> It is in this sense that the authors can speak of the "mythology of historical criticism." But how do they propose to demonstrate that this mythology permeates historical criticism?

They do this by themselves engaging, somewhat superficially, in my opinion, in historical methodology and writing, that is, in historical criticism, as they review previous historical-critical scholarship, especially of New Testament studies. Using the methods of historical criticism they can show how the views of scholars were influenced by the philosophies of their own time in the ways in which they attempted to develop their historical reconstructions, and then they judge these reconstructions to be "myths," whether they are Hegelian, existential, liberal Christian or any other ideology. From this the authors leap to the conclusion that historical criticism is just another method of myth-making.

There is, in my opinion, something quite disingenuous about this line of argument. What is mythical or ideological in all of the examples that they present is not historical methodology itself but

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the authors' claim that "the postmodern appears 'in the modern,' as Lyotard says, but in the form of radical critiques of modernist ideology" (p. 385).

<sup>2</sup> I would like to stress that, in my opinion, when myth includes everything, it means nothing.

an *external* ideology that has been brought to bear upon the historical results to give them a particular shape and turn the body of data into a “mythical” form. As the authors themselves show, it is precisely the historical methodology continuously refined over time that can identify these extraneous “mythical” or ideological elements to create a less “mythical” historical analysis. The authors make deliberate use of a prior history of the discipline to set out for us what those who practice in the field already know.

Yet, strangely, they use as an example for historical criticism the work of Brevard Childs. The latter’s canon criticism may well be a good case of Christian “mythic work,” but canon criticism is not historical criticism and is indeed in many ways antithetical to it. In fact, it has very little interest in history, historical methodology, or the history of the text. Canon criticism stands closer to postmodernist than to historical-critical approaches, as it shares with the latter its concern for the “final form” of the text and rejects any grounding in historical methodology.

The section of the article I found the least conducive for a conversation among practitioners of both approaches, and which I found personally most disturbing, is the outlandish caricature of historical criticism. The authors state:

Mythically, historical criticism reveals a deep desire to get back to some original, an *arvê* or First Signified, which is always theological or ideological, such as the real Jesus or the actual ancient Israel. This desire is fundamentally Romantic, and as an expression of modernism, historical criticism is the product of both the Enlightenment and Romanticism. The former is most evident in the frequent attempts by historical critics to arrive at a rational or scientifically grounded self-identity. The latter is most evident in historical criticism’s nostalgic desire for an *arvê*. The scholar wants to make sense of the text, and, as the text by itself may not make sense, she replaces the text in its present form with other forms of the text from supposed, but highly speculative, earlier stages in its history (such as Q, or J, E, P, D). The text’s truth, value, or meaning derives finally from its originating source, whether author(s), redactor(s), or historical milieu (p. 395).

First, the attempt to characterize all historical criticism and scientific investigation as a religious quest for mythical origins is, in my opinion, ludicrous. In fact, such a statement is itself highly ideological. Take the example of “the actual ancient Israel.” What historical criticism has done, using both literary criticism and the external evidence of archaeology and texts of foreign cultures is to call into question the “myths” of Israel’s origins represented in the biblical texts, whether in the patriarchal stories, or the story of the exodus from Egypt and conquest of the land, or in the rise of a united monarchy in Jerusalem over the peoples of both Israel and Judah. It has recognized, on the basis of external evidence, that

there was a state of Israel centered in Samaria from the time of Omri onward to its demise at the hands of the Assyrians, and that there was also a roughly contemporary smaller state of Judah that came to an end under the Babylonians. We have references to these two states in biblical texts and we can try to evaluate critically what in the biblical tradition may be useful for developing a history of this region in the Iron Age. We can even suggest some possibilities about the pre-history of these states. What is so theological or ideological about that? There may be some who are theologically motivated in the way in which they approach the archaeological or textual material, but the authors' use of "always" makes no allowance for exceptions. Over the course of the last half century historical criticism has taught us that the origins of *biblical* Israel can only be found in the ideological origins created by the biblical writers.

Second, we may dismiss immediately the statement that historical criticism is the product of Romanticism. On the contrary, it is much older than that and even has its roots in antiquity, but it was the special concern of scholars of the Enlightenment, such as Richard Bentley who was strongly opposed to Romanticism.<sup>3</sup> These concerns had nothing to do with mythical origins, only the desire to rid the texts of scribal corruptions and the deliberate falsification of an ancient author's work. The method was also used to identify forgeries for which Bentley became famous. I would certainly not deny that some historical critics were influenced by Romanticism, although most were opposed to its anti-historical sentiments.<sup>4</sup>

Third, it is not enough to caricature the historical critic as an ideologue searching for origins, but the authors must play the role of historical critics themselves and tell us that the *origins* of historical criticism lie in Enlightenment and Romanticism and this assertion is regarded as self-evident. Since the Romantic movement was a protest against the strong emphasis on rational thought at the expense of emotion, the fanciful and the ideal, expressed most strongly in the arts and literature, it was mostly in conflict with historical criticism and the sciences. There is no doubt that some scholars engaged in the study of biblical literature were influenced by Romanticism and this affected their historical critical judgments. But, as the authors recognize, this was also the case with many subsequent philosophies and other intellectual movements. So Romanticism should not be given a privileged place in the history

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<sup>3</sup> See my remarks in *The Edited Bible*, 124-30. Anthony Grafton, in *What was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pushes the roots of historical criticism much further back to the early modern period.

<sup>4</sup> See T. N. Baker, "National History in the Age of Michelet, Macaulay, and Bancroft," pp. 185-204 in L. Kramer and S. Maza, eds., *A Companion to Western Historical Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), esp. 186-89, for a treatment of the "romantic" historians' relationship to the Enlightenment.

of historical scholarship, as the authors of “An Elephant in the Room” have done. In fact, postmodernists have more in common with post-Enlightenment Romanticism than historical critics.

Fourth, the authors’ characterization of the work of a historical critic as the reconstruction of “highly speculative, earlier stages in [the text’s] history” is intended to be derogatory as compared with treating the final form of the text in a completely fanciful manner without any concern for its historical context. One could, in fact, characterize such efforts as pre-critical and homiletical, having much more in common with religious exegesis. That presumably is why what the authors called “baptized,” forms of post-modernism are becoming a favorite method within evangelical Christianity (see p. 385), because it obviates any serious confrontation with historical criticism.<sup>5</sup> The statement that “historical criticism has worked hand in hand with the established churches, to the extent that both scholar and church person take history as the equivalent of religious truth” (p. 395) is simply not true. On the contrary, from the very beginning historical criticism has been conceived as a threat to the established church because religious truth and historical truth were perceived to be at odds with each other. It is true that liberal theology has tried to accommodate itself to the reality of modern science and the results of historical criticism. But for the most part it still uses only the final form of the text for its popular homilies, much as postmodernists do. In fact, the biblical theology to which the authors allude, was at its peak in the 60s and has been in decline ever since.<sup>6</sup> Thus their discussion of the relationship between historical criticism and the church is a serious distortion of the facts.

Fifth, the authors in the above quote locate historical criticism’s quest for the mythical *arché* in its efforts to identify “author(s), redactor(s), and historical milieu.” It is hard to take this statement seriously. Let us take the example of their own article. As a historical critic I would be willing to accept the three names under the title as the authors of the article. Nothing in the article says that this is the case, but this speculation seems reasonable, and I would look no further. Regarding the process of redaction, the matter is more difficult. Since there are three authors and presumably all have contributed to the piece, and since there is a certain amount of repetition in the piece, one may well assume a redactional process. But one would have to know the larger corpus of their work very well to be able to speculate what each of them contributed, and I frankly see little to be gained in this effort. Nev-

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<sup>5</sup> For similar reasons, literary approaches—some of which are “post-modernist”—tend to be preferred over historical critical methods within these circles.

<sup>6</sup> See B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

ertheless, there would be nothing mythical in the exercise, and the authors themselves could help by telling us exactly how they did it. And as far as the historical milieu is concerned, one would certainly not identify it as a 16<sup>th</sup> century document. Quite apart from the fact that it is contained in a precisely dated journal, the content itself gives any historian adequate evidence to place it within a fairly narrow socio-historical milieu. What is mythical about any of this "quest" for sources?

The authors go on to discuss the characteristics of postmodernism and they attempt to state at some length that it is not just something "other" than modernism. However, the fact is that postmodernism arose within the arts, architecture, literary criticism and philosophy precisely as something "other" than modernism and a protest against it (cf. citation in note 1). In fact they admit that, "[p]ostmodernism cannot exist apart from modernism" (p. 397). Indeed, as mentioned above, its very identity depends upon being "other" than modernism and it is constantly at pains to deny the validity of everything for which they think the world of "modernism" stands (including historical criticism/methodology). As mentioned above, historical criticism does not need postmodernism as an "other." The vast changes that have come about in historical studies in general and biblical historical criticism in particular, as they have in modern science, owe nothing to postmodernism and everything to its own hermeneutic of suspicion. It is for this reason that most historical critics do not feel obliged to spend time plowing through vast quantities of the postmodern literature and adopting a new "scholarly" jargon in order to attempt a dialogue. There have been some notable attempts at dialogue by major historians, but they have accomplished little in establishing any debate.<sup>7</sup>

The authors of "An Elephant in the Room" do not like to stick to any particular ground rules for their discussion, lest they be seen as too "rational" or "essentialist". Thus, on the one hand, they make use of the history of scholarship to show the diversity of ideological perspectives among modern historical critics as proof of the discipline's mythology, even though the fact of such diversity has been brought to light by the discipline's own self-criticism and is not the result of postmodernist "research." They only employ their evidence of repeated *contamination* of historical criticism by ideology because they find it useful to their argument. On the other hand, there is a much stronger impulse towards broad generaliza-

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<sup>7</sup> See E. Hobsbaum, "Postmodernism in the Forest," *On History* (London: Abacus, 1997), 254-65; A. Cameron, ed., *History as Text* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1989); J. Appleby, L. Hunt, M. Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994). Also K. Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*; J. L. Gaddis, *The Landscape of History*; E. Fox-Genovese and E. Lasch-Quinn, eds. *Reconstructing History*; R. J. Evans, *In Defence of History*.

tion. Thus since historical critics are “modernists” the authors can use contemporary novels and films to characterize briefly how all modernists, including all historians, think over the last few centuries, even though it would be the easiest thing in the world to show that a vast quantity of literature does not reflect the belief that “the modern, heroic individual triumphs over these forces [of evil] and finds freedom in a better, transformed world” (398). I do not know what modern dream world Aichele et al. live in, but contemporary historians are the least likely to share this utopian perspective.

By contrast, it is much easier to explain postmodernism on the basis of contemporary literature, from which it largely derives. Thus, the authors claim that “the postmodernist lives in endless irony or parody... (a)s such, she is no hero and expects no successful struggle” (p. 398). The implication is that it is postmodernism that has discovered irony and parody and now wishes to read *every* text in this way. The fact is that irony and parody have played a vital role in literature since ancient times and it did not take postmodernism to point out this fact. One thinks of Aristophanes’s comedies, but many of the plays of Euripides are also deliberately ironic and a parody of the heroic age. Even in the biblical texts one can find irony and parody without reading it into the text. It is there because the author of the biblical text put it there to be read as such by his particular ancient audience. I have long advocated the view that this is the case in much of the David story, and it is spelled out in my latest book, *The Biblical Saga of King David*.<sup>8</sup> This owes nothing to postmodernist interests in parody. Nevertheless, it is true that in postmodern literature a great deal is made of irony and parody and this has been taken over into postmodern biblical hermeneutics.

In sum, what I found most disturbing and clearly counterproductive in an attempt at dialogue is the endless generalizations about historical critics—and even about other postmodernists. I doubt whether these generalizations all apply in any particular case, and most should be seriously contested as having nothing to do with the discipline of historical criticism or historical methodology. To be sure, one can always find particular historians/historical critics who are inconsistent in the application of their method because of a belief, or an idea, or prejudice that does not arise from the historical evidence, and which has influenced their work in unfortunate ways. That has happened throughout the entire history of scholarship, but that is no reason to discard the historical, *wissenschaftliche* method. There is no post-scientific/*wissenschaftlich* or post-historic era, and we engage in such fantasies at our peril. Contrary to the (implied) assertion that contemporary historians claim to be “in possession of the Truth,” (p. 401) and that it is only postmo-

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<sup>8</sup> J. Van Seters, *The Biblical Saga of King David* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009).

dernists that give up this claim, nothing could be a greater distortion of what science and historical criticism is all about. Indeed, it was precisely historical criticism who centuries ago challenged the final Truth of the biblical literalists and has continued to do so to this day. While some held that partial historical truth could be recovered from a quite unhistorical text, the optimism of this endeavor has steadily decreased to the point that historical critics have often been labeled “minimalist,” and in the popular mind have been confused with postmodernists who are unconcerned with historical research.

## PART II – INTERTEXTUALITY, NOVELS AND BOUNDARIES

The authors of “An Elephant in the Room” show great interest in the use of intertextuality in biblical exegesis. Their interest is not concerned with establishing the historical relationship between texts that has been the hallmark of the old school of literary and historical criticism in scholarship at large. Instead, it is “much more interested in the relations that *readers* (not *writers*) establish *between* texts (of whatever chronological order)” (p. 403). There is nothing particularly postmodern about this method. It permeates the forms of textual reading and interpretation of the OT that one finds in the NT and the rabbinic reading of the Tanak in the talmuds and midrashim, and in the whole pre-modern period. In fundamentalist traditions, whether Jewish or Christian, in which the Bible is the word of God, texts from anywhere in the whole corpus can be put together in a completely non-historical fashion, in order to fashion a homily or sermon, or construct a learned theological treatise.

One also finds this use of intertextuality in a quite different contemporary example, which I found most instructive. After I had written my book on the David Saga, I was given a copy of Joseph Heller’s novel *God Knows* (1984).<sup>9</sup> The book is set within the context of 1 Kings 1 and David’s last days, and it is presented as an autobiographical reflection by David in which he previews his whole life as the implied author of the book. This David also makes references to much more of the biblical content, including the Torah, the historical books, and Chronicles, the “Davidic” Psalms and wisdom. He even quotes Qoheleth as his own work and makes reference to works of art, music and literature throughout history down to modern times. The remarks of David are quite deliberately anachronistic and unhistorical with no pretext to view the book as a “historical” novel. Nevertheless, the book gives evidence of being a very “close reading” of the text in the sense that Heller shows remarkable familiarity with the whole range of the Hebrew Bible. But above all, the work is intended as satire, and it is

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<sup>9</sup> J. Heller, *God Knows* (A Laurel Book; New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1984). On Heller, see, for instance, S. Pinsker, *Understanding Joseph Heller* (Rev. ed.; Columbia, SC: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 2009).

this “reading” of the David story that makes it, in my opinion, particularly postmodern. This is quite apart from the fact that much in the text in the David story itself is intentionally ironic, as I have argued in my book. But Heller is not interested in whether the biblical text is ironic within its own historical context; he uses his ironic reading as a parody of the idealized understanding of the pious David in contemporary society.

In other words, when one takes into consideration the obsession with intertextuality, with deliberate anachronism, with the focus on parody, and many other such rhetorical devices, Heller’s book has all the hallmarks of a postmodernist reading of the David story. Mordecai Richler, in his *New York Times* review of Sept 23, 1984, places the book within the context of the Jewish community of New York and describes Heller as a “latter-day Rashi” with a style more commentary than novel, although it is at the same time an obvious parody on the mode of midrashic interpretation practiced in the Yeshiva. It is both a reflection of that context and a satirical treatment of it. But Heller’s reading of the David story is not scholarship and it is certainly not intended as an alternative to historical criticism; it is a novel and is to be read as a novel, and as such I have no difficulty with it. The book is entertainment and as such it is very funny, even if at times it is a little over the top.

I wonder whether some postmodernists who were trained as scholars aspire (perhaps in a way unbeknownst to them) to be novelists, and their work should be viewed, at least in part, in the same way.

It is in this context that it may be instructive to look at another noted novelist who wrote a piece of fiction, based upon the biblical story of David, Stefan Heym’s *The King David Report* (1973).<sup>10</sup> Heym, in an “author’s note” at the end of the book, makes it quite clear that the perspective that he adopts on the David story as an official report produced by a court historian at the very beginning of Solomon’s reign, is heavily dependent upon the prevailing German scholarship of the day (pp. 253–54). As such the character of the narrative in 2 Samuel 6 to 1 Kings 2 is viewed as based upon archival written sources, the oral testimony of David’s contemporaries who were still alive at the time of writing, and popular oral tradition; and it is this variety of sources that account for the contradictions and literary unevenness in the final text. The historian, Ethan of Ezrah (see 1 Kings 4:31 and Psalm 89:1), is

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<sup>10</sup> Stefan Heym (=Helmut Flieg), *The King David Report*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, 1984). For studies about Stefan Heym, see P. Hutchinson, *Stefan Heym: the Perpetual Dissident* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992) and P. Hutchinson and R. K. Zachau (eds.) *Stefan Heym: Socialist, Dissenter, Jew = Stefan Heym: Sozialist, Dissident, Jude* (British and Irish Studies in German Language and Literature, 32; Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt/M., New York, Wien: Peter Lang, 2003).

understood as little more than a "redactor" who was subject to the authority of a commission to produce an authoritative *King David Report* that is "slanted so as to legitimise the rule of David's successor, the wise King Solomon" (p. 253). Consequently, it is a historical novel, as Heym himself admits, and in this genre it is an attempt to make plausible how it was that this complex narrative, with all its problems and contradictions, came into being.

However, beyond this first level of historical novel there is another that speaks to Heym's own contemporary level of his location in East Germany under the DDR, where there was strict censorship of anything that might reflect badly upon the current regime, including the writing of history. In this respect it is a story about one who is caught in a bind between telling the truth about David and risking his life in the process or writing a version that would be more palatable to Solomon and his entourage. Thus it is "a story of today, charged with political meaning" (p. 254) in which satire constitutes a major element. Yet Heym also mentions a third possibility, a biblical novel, by which I understand him to mean a parable or midrash. It is in this last respect that perhaps he is hinting at the work as a parody of biblical scholarship and its attempt to read the story of David as history. In support of this suggestion is the fact that he does include some anachronisms that are quite blatantly unhistorical, such as the particular house address of Ethan the historian in Jerusalem, No. 54, Queen of Sheba Lane, or that he is so often referred to as a "redactor," or the vast number of historical tablets and scrolls scattered about in so many places that must be tracked down, many of which are full of lacuna that allow for a variety of learned interpretations. While Heym seems to favor the designation of his work as a historical novel, he nevertheless acknowledges that the work is all three: a historical novel, a biblical novel and a political novel, and allows the reader to decide for him/herself.

Nevertheless, the work of Heym is not a postmodern novel. When one compares his work with that of Heller, the two novels could not possibly be more different, even though they cover the same range of biblical material. The one is heavily dependent upon critical scholarship and attempts to take it seriously, even when he has a little fun at the scholar's expense; the other simply ignores those issues or makes them the occasion of humor. Indeed, it is possible that Heller was quite familiar with Heym's work and created a parody of it, as well as his other objects of ridicule. Thus, while Heym has his "redactor" struggle to collect and evaluate all his sources and carefully fit them together while trying not to offend the Royal Commission, Heller uses the one impeccable source, David himself by means of a death bed autobiography, and David has no qualms about whom he might offend by his remarks, including Solomon who is cast in the most unflattering light. In

place of the great quantity of clay tablets and scrolls that Ethan accumulates in the *King David Report*, Heller has the rather dim-witted young Solomon running around after David with a slate and stylus, copying down all of David's proverbs, songs and cynical wisdom (Qoheleth), which David is sure Solomon will claim to be his own after David is dead. In Heym's story it is the wise man Ethan who is the real author of many proverbs and songs attributed to Solomon. Furthermore, while Heym makes much of what he regards as David's homosexual relationship both with Jonathan and Saul, Heller has David flatly reject the allegation that he is gay and blames Joab for spreading such rumors about him. In a strange and rather ribald way, Heller's work seems much more realistic than that of Heym. The danger with Heym's novel is that it only works so long as the scholarship about the historical David to which it is tied is viable, but once it has become suspect, then the story of Ethan the historian no longer works. Thus, there is little basis for believing in written documentation and archival sources produced by Saul and Samuel, and David and all his courtiers, which the fictional historian Ethan is said to have used. And there are serious reasons for not believing in a "King David Report" and its need to legitimize Solomon's claim to the throne. Heym's historical novel is therefore full of quite unintentional as well as intentional anachronisms, such that it becomes a parody of the historical novel genre itself.

The dependence of Heym upon historical criticism for his novel comes full circle to create a certain irony when Baruch Halpern, in his recent study of David in *David's Secret Demons*,<sup>11</sup> constructs his history more in the nature of a historical novel quite similar to, and dependent upon Heym, when he makes the story of David very much like a "King David Report" produced by Solomon's court. He states: "No novel about the Bible is so accomplished in the historical art as Stefan Heym's brilliant *The King David Report*" (p. 5). It is, of course, pure fiction; there is nothing historical about it. Halpern apparently cannot tell the difference. The reason for Halpern's praise is the simple fact that Heym's reconstruction agrees so closely with that of Halpern's own history, and this in spite of all the evidence produced in the last three decades to the contrary.<sup>12</sup> While there are a few such lingering examples in scholarship of how the story of David can be made into history, the time for such efforts has passed. If one wants a good story based upon a close reading of the text, then my preference would certainly be for Heller's novel of David, which, however, makes no

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<sup>11</sup> B. Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> By contrast he disapproves of the "disappointing satirical theodicy of Joseph Heller, *God Knobs*" for his complete parody of historical seriousness.

pretence to be historical and a scholarly reconstruction of what happened. It is a very witty parody and nothing more.<sup>13</sup>

I sent an email message to all three authors of "An Elephant in the Room" and asked them what they had in mind by way of a forum for the kind of dialogue between themselves and any historical critics who might wish to engage them in debate. They had no suggestions, although they insisted that their invitation was genuine. I did not send them my remarks contained in this piece but I did ask them how they would respond to my observation that what they were doing was no different from the postmodernist novel as exemplified by the work of Heller on David. They mostly avoided the issue, but one of them admitted that he had no problem with being compared to a novelist. The strong similarity is, to my mind, obvious. Yet they all insisted that they were scholars not novelists, unlike, of course, the novelist Heller. This raises, of course, a question of boundaries, since they could not provide me with a single significant instance in which their analysis/narrative differed substantially from that of Heller. Is scholarship to write a novel? Is a novel a work of scholarship?

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<sup>13</sup> In contrast to Halpern, Steven McKenzie, seems to take his inspiration from Heller in writing his story of David as a biography and the element of irony in the work. See S. L. McKenzie, *King David, A Biography* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 175-76. On the other hand, McKenzie, like Halpern, also accepts the view that "Heym's depiction of the David story as propaganda is a useful vision of how it originated" (p. 26). Both Halpern and McKenzie have been seriously misled in this respect. There is nothing corresponding to state propaganda in the final form of the David story. (See my *The Biblical Saga of King David*).