



David, God, and the Word

MARTI J. STEUSSY

Since the Protestant Reformation, the church's task of biblical interpretation has been complicated by challenges to both the moral soundness of certain biblical narratives and their historicity. To a preacher who has wrestled with Joshua's slaughter of Jericho's civilians and Achan's family, while hearing from archeologists that Jericho was unwallled and uninhabited in Joshua's time, David's story in 1 and 2 Samuel may seem a haven. Here God works less by flashy miracles than by subtle nudges credible to modern minds (even David's defeat of Goliath proceeds "naturally"). Populist cultural tendencies and liberation theologies encourage our embrace of the underdog Israelites struggling against mighty Philistines and underdog David persecuted by a mighty Saul. When Bible students further hear that the broad historical picture of 1 and 2 Samuel seems credible,¹ they tend to take a deep breath and relax—too soon. In this article I will give examples of ways in which I think contemporary scholarship challenges conventional Christian understandings of David and his God. I will then reflect on some implications for our understanding of the Bible.

¹A few scholars contend (very hotly) that David, Solomon, and the "united monarchy" over which they are supposed to have ruled did not exist in the tenth century B.C.E. They attribute the whole story to the propagandizing vision of much later writers. For an example of this view, see Philip R. Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel*, 2d ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995). For examples of the defense of the united monarchy's archaeological credibility, see William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) or, for a more detailed treatment, Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

The David story in 1–2 Samuel, read as it stands, depicts a frequently problematic God. What will present readers of faith do with this? If the genre of the story is "propaganda," are we sure that God wants us simply to swallow it? What if God means to use it to make us think?

DAVID AND THE PHILISTINES

Because the Samuel books' stories of David now stand in a collection (the Bible) to which we look for spiritual edification and guidance, we unconsciously tend to assume that the stories were composed for just such use. But even those scholars who give greatest historical credence to the David stories overwhelmingly understand them as politically engaged literature. As Walter Brueggemann comments, the story of David's rise to the throne is consistently described by scholars with terms such as "legitimation, apology, glorification, and propaganda—it is clear that we do not have a descriptive account of what happened, nor do we have a critical account that means to balance evidence and assess the data for accuracy."² The same may be and usually is said of subsequent components of David's story. As Steven McKenzie and Mark Throntveit put it elsewhere in this issue, David's story has been "spin doctored." The implications for our understanding of David can be troubling. Let's look at how they play out with regard to David, Saul, and the Philistines.

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In 1 Sam 18:1–16, an account which seems a little disjointed,³ Saul promotes David to a high position in the army. Shortly thereafter, we hear that "Saul planned to make David fall by the hand of the Philistines" (18:25, articulating an intention also mentioned in 18:17 and 21). The plan does not work, for David is quite good at slaughtering Philistines, but it serves as a brick in the narrator's edifice of condemnation against Saul.

According to the biblical account, David ultimately flees from Saul to King Achish of Gath (a Philistine city, Goliath's hometown). In 1 Sam 27, Achish accepts David as a vassal, granting him a city in which to house his men. The result is that prior to the climactic battle at the end of 1 Samuel, David and his men muster with the Philistines rather than with the Israelites. However, the other Philistine lords force Achish to send David from the battlefield (1 Sam 29), leaving the impression that David has nothing to do with Saul's death in the battle.

For an idea of how different things can look if we assume that the accounts are propaganda, let's take a quick look at Baruch Halpern's reconstruction. Halpern has no qualms about affirming the existence of a "historical David," but he points out that "David bears a name without a basis in Israelite nomenclature. His

²Walter Brueggemann, *David's Truth in Israel's Imagination and Memory*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 9.

³Saul sets David over the army in 18:5, but becomes jealous in 18:8 when David's victories are acclaimed, and therefore makes him a commander in 18:13. This logic seems disturbed on more than one count, and may result from the combining of different versions of the story.

father is of indeterminate origin.” Furthermore, David comes from Bethlehem, “a Jebusite suburb that housed a Philistine corps.” Halpern suggests that David was not Israelite at all, and that the whole story of David’s service in Saul’s court is a fabrication that both obscures David’s foreign origins and blames David’s Philistine alliances on Saul (who allegedly drove David away and rebuffed all attempts at reconciliation).⁴ Given the admission in 2 Sam 1 that David ended up in possession of Saul’s crown and armlet, how sure are we that he was really absent from Saul’s final confrontation with the Philistines?

We can stay far closer to the lines of the biblical story and still be troubled over David’s role. The text itself states that David served Achish and was present on the wrong side before the battle. Even if we accept the contention in 1 Sam 30 that David is sent away and is fighting Amalekites in the Negeb at the time of Saul’s death, this means that David succeeds at precisely what Saul attempted: having his rival “fall by the hand of the Philistines.” Furthermore, David’s gift-sending in 1 Sam 30:26–31 looks suspiciously like bribery of the elders who will shortly crown him in Hebron, and David undertakes it *before* he receives word that Saul is dead.⁵ It is also odd that the messenger of 2 Sam 1—so well informed that he knows both where to lay hands on Saul’s crown and where to find David afterwards—seems utterly *uninformed* about David’s dislike for Amalekites and his love for Saul. If we read the text as propaganda, we have to wonder whether David was as innocent of ambitious scheming as the text would have us believe.

DAVID, JOAB, AND ABNER

The events of 2 Sam 3 are placed between David’s assumption of power over Judah and his coronation by the northern tribes. The narrator portrays Saul’s surviving son Ishbaal (a.k.a. Ish-bosheth) as a weakling. When his general, Abner, takes Saul’s erstwhile concubine Rizpah (an action which seems to have constituted a symbolic claim to Saul’s throne), Ishbaal complains but cannot press his objection. Abner storms away and offers Israel to David. David accepts it, on condition (!) that Saul’s daughter Michal be “returned” to him. (First Samuel says David married her during his days at Saul’s court, but was this story created to justify David’s later seizure of her?) Again, claiming a woman from Saul’s household functions as symbolic appropriation of Saul’s kingship. David receives both Michal (whose husband Paltiel follows weeping, 3:15) and the promised political support.

David’s own general is not pleased. Joab calls Abner a spy, then summons

⁴Halpern, *David’s Secret Demons*, 275 and 280–284. With regard to David’s cordial relationships with the Philistines, it is interesting to note that in Absalom’s rebellion, 600 mercenaries from Gath elect to go into exile with David, while “all the Israelites” are said to follow Absalom (2 Sam 15:18–22 and 16:15).

⁵Notice that the gifts are Amalekite booty, which Saul was forbidden to take and over which Samuel disinherited Saul in 1 Sam 15. David is crowned by Judah in 2 Sam 2:4. He becomes king of the northern tribes in 2 Sam 5:1–5, apparently just after the assassinations of Abner and Ishbaal. But if Ishbaal reigned only two years, whence the seven and a half years that David reigned as king of Judah (2:10–11)? Did he become king in the south *before* Saul’s death and Ishbaal’s succession?

him back and kills him. Joab's action is explained as revenge for a younger brother killed by Abner (2 Sam 2:18–23; 3:30). David appears totally dismayed. "I and my kingdom are forever guiltless....as one falls before the wicked you [Abner] have fallen....a prince and a great man has fallen this day....Today I am powerless" (3:28, 34, 38, 39).

According to this chapter, Abner's defection is accepted but not solicited or encouraged by David (who makes no promises and even imposes extra conditions). David has no inkling that Joab, despite his blood-claim on Abner, may take action against the rival general. David, though outraged, claims that he has no control over Joab. He does not attempt to dismiss him.

But why does David so urgently disclaim responsibility, if the murderer has such an obvious personal motive? If David truly cannot control Joab, why does he later trust him to carry out Uriah's murder (2 Sam 11:14–17)? If David really objects so strenuously and publicly to the killings of Saul (2 Sam 1) and Abner, how can Rechab and Baanah expect reward in 2 Sam 4 for bringing him Ishbaal's head? Does David order their execution (if this detail can be trusted) because he is outraged, or to ensure that they won't say who ordered the assassination?

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Halpern suggests that the story comes from Solomon's writers, and serves less to excuse David than to defend Solomon's execution of Joab (who supported David's older son, Adonijah, 1 Kings 1:7; 2:5–6 and 28–34) and placate those who still remember Saul's house fondly. Other scholars, taking the story at something closer to face value but still suspecting that it suppresses important information, speculate that David had promised Abner a generalship, knowing full well that Joab would act to prevent this. My Samuel students decided that rather than attempt to reconstruct the history behind the text, we should focus on what was written. David, however, was protesting a little too much. We could not shake the sense that this was political propaganda, and the session in which we read the story of Abner's assassination aloud was a chilling one. Some Christians, seeing such misgivings as an example of modern skepticism, might call for a return to more "innocent" interpretations. But if the stories were indeed composed to defend David, we can conclude that even the original audience entertained suspicions. Otherwise, pro-David propaganda would not have been needed.

THE GOD OF NATHAN'S REBUKE (2 SAM 12)

What kind of God emerges from the work of David's propagandists? That the David to whom Philistines are more loyal than Israelites and who keeps Abner's as-

sassin as right-hand man throughout his career should be a man after God's own heart (1 Sam 13:14) has its own disturbing implications, but issues become more explicit in Nathan's confrontation with David about adultery and the murder of Uriah (2 Sam 12).⁶ David "took" Bathsheba, we are told in 2 Sam 11:4, a "taking" underscored by Nathan's use of the term in the ewe lamb parable and the subsequent oracle. As readers, we are glad to hear David rebuked for his taking. But it is not the "taking" of women per se that annoys God. God, according to 12:8, has already taken Saul's wives and given them to David, "and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more!"⁷ God speaks of the women as transferable royal assets. Perhaps David is not supposed to take them for himself, but God seems quite willing to take them for David ("do as I say, not as I do"). The problem in God's eyes, at least in this chapter, is not that David took women but that his manner of doing so "dissed" God.

That God is not bothered by the taking of women becomes even clearer in 2 Sam 12:11: "I [God] will take your [David's] wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor." While this may be "justice" with respect to David (what he did to others will be done to him), it hardly appears just with respect to the wives. The threat points forward to Absalom's rebellion. When David flees Jerusalem, he leaves ten concubines to look after his house (2 Sam 15:16). Absalom has a tent pitched on the palace roof and takes his father's concubines "in the sight of all Israel" (2 Sam 16:22). Thus Absalom publicizes his royal claim, for (as in 2 Sam 3) a displaced king's power is symbolized by his women.

But God is too fond of David to let the coup succeed. Once David has been reminded of his dependence on God's support (note his humbled attitude in 2 Sam 15:25–26, 15:31, and 16:11–12), God subverts the rebels' plans (17:14). What happens to the concubines? David "put them in a house under guard, and provided for them, but did not go in to them. So they were shut up until the day of their death, living as if in widowhood" (20:3).

The term "patriarchal" comes quickly to mind. Without doubt, this tale of an apparently male God's redistribution of women among human men does express a patriarchal mindset. But God also treats male humans as tokens in the game with David. According to 2 Sam 12:8, the assets transferred from Saul to David include not only Saul's women, but his family ("house"; chapter 21 tells how David dis-

⁶As reported in 2 Sam 11, Uriah's murder involves two strategies we have seen before: enlisting Joab's help and letting foreign enemies kill a politically inconvenient person. Halpern (*David's Secret Demons*, 92–94 and 401–406) contends that this is the one murder in the books of Samuel of which David is probably innocent. He argues that the story is fabricated to provide Solomon (a legitimate son of Uriah, in Halpern's view) with a Davidic heritage. Others more mildly speculate that the adulterously conceived child was Solomon himself, with the story of the first baby's death concocted later to distance Solomon from scandal. (Why couldn't anybody remember the king mourning a dead baby? Because David reacted so strangely, 12:20–23.) My discussion will stick to the text: here I am asking not what "really happened," but what depiction of God the propaganda version yields.

⁷What wives of Saul was David given? Is the Ahinoam of 1 Sam 14:50 the same as the Ahinoam of 1 Sam 25:43 and elsewhere, and is that why only Saul's concubine, rather than his wife, was available for Abner in 2 Sam 3:7? Or should we translate the Hebrew word simply as women, in which case "your master's women" might also include Saul's daughter Michal, whom we saw brought to David in 2 Sam 3:13–16?

poses of the sons and grandsons) and all Israel and Judah! Later, in 12:13–14, God responds to David’s confession by sparing him from death. Instead God, who feels “utterly scorned,” will “make your sin cross over” onto the baby. (“To make something cross over” is the ordinary meaning of the Hebrew term that NRSV translates, in these verses, as “put away.”) God also apparently sparks the deaths of Amnon and Adonijah and Absalom’s rebellion (“the sword shall not depart from your house”), in which tens of thousands of Israelite soldiers die (18:7–8).

The confrontation in 2 Sam 12, then, does not deliver what we might look for in terms of divine concern for King David’s people. There are limits on what God will take from David, but the transaction is firmly focused on the personal relationship between David and God, at considerable expense to other human beings.

THE SAMUEL BOOKS AS BIBLE

The problematic portrayal of God in 2 Sam 12 and elsewhere in the books of Samuel may be understandable if the purpose of the writing is not (as usually assumed) to educate persons across the ages about God’s love or expectations for us, but to persuade persons of Solomon’s time that David and Solomon after him reign as God’s personal and closely supported favorites. But how then are we to understand this as Scripture? If David and Solomon climbed to leadership by ruthless means, then doctored the stories of events (and of God’s involvement) to cover their misdeeds and bolster their claims of divine election, how are those propaganda stories and their statements about God to be handled today?

One option is to pretend that there is no problem, denying the historical questions or holding that while the Bible’s historical information may be unreliable, its statements about God are unremittingly sound. Under this option, readers usually take the protestations of David’s innocence at face value.

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about God to be handled today?”*

However, this approach gives less credence than it claims to the face value of Scripture. Most first-time readers feel something disproportionate in the vehemence with which God rejects Saul, and for God to inspire Saul’s scheming against David seems fair to neither Saul nor David. Those persons alert enough to notice God’s attitude towards the wives in 2 Sam 12 usually draw back from that as well. But since most Christians are as uncomfortable as Job’s friends with questions about God’s justice, Christian readers tend to resolve the tensions by supplementing the pro-David propaganda already in the texts with additional God-justifying explanations. They often say, for instance, that Saul was chosen by humans rather than God (this is not what 1 Sam 9:15–17 says), or that the evil spirit from God tormented Saul because of Saul’s jealousy and scheming against David (though in 1 Samuel, the evil spirit precedes rather than follows the jealousy). Many try to soften

the gravity of David's sins by contending that Bathsheba went out of her way to allure him, and recast God's concern in 2 Sam 12 as one of care for David's *people* rather than pique at David's disrespect for *God* (12:9, 10, 14). In short, in an effort to salvage the text, readers begin to gloss over its details, showing less commitment to the Bible's words than was initially claimed.

Yet the strategy has worthy goals. It follows, in many ways, Augustine's "rule of love": the purpose of interpretation is to advance love of God and neighbor, and interpretations that do not achieve this must be suspect.⁸

While I honor Augustine's priorities, my experience is that whitewash doesn't stick very well. I believe that even after we have suppressed our initial misgivings and smoothed gaps with moralizing explanation, we continue to pick up, unconsciously if not consciously, on the problematic aspects of the Samuel books' portrayal of God. This God seems to be more offended by procedural disobedience (Saul's offenses in 1 Sam 13 and 15) than by high-handed treatment of other human beings (recall our discussion of 2 Sam 12). This God also plays favorites: Saul is implicitly condemned for trying to use Philistines to kill David, but no censure attaches to David when he leaves Saul to the Philistines. Even when we try to salvage a "God of love" image by emphasizing God's commitment to and willingness to forgive David (to whom even the propaganda attributes two mortal sins), the undertow often finds its way into our own faith, so that we confuse grace with patronly favor (concluding that the most important thing is to be properly obsequious to God) and/or suppose that God's love for us entails God being straightforwardly on "our side" and against our enemies.

Additionally, I think we should not confuse faith with gullibility. Can trust in the God who creates, sustains, and redeems us really be equated with, or dependent upon, wholesale acceptance of the assertions of Solomon's propagandists? Most people are comfortable with the idea that good Bible study requires "discernment," and even those who believe in inerrancy and the exact verbal inspiration of the Bible agree that we need to take genre into account in interpretation (so, for instance, Judg 9:8–15 does not require that we believe in talking trees, since this is properly understood as a fable). What then if, by our best discernment, the genre of the Samuel narratives appears to be propaganda? Many simply reject the possibility that God would include such a genre in the Bible. But how do we know what God might or might not include? Is not the Bible itself our best evidence? Perhaps we should quit protesting that God could not have included such a thing and begin asking what God wants us to do with it! Are we sure that God wants us simply to swallow it? What if God means to use it to make us think?⁹

This opens up all kinds of new ways to deal with the books. For instance, one

⁸Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, I.35 and elsewhere. See, e.g., Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 49 (sections 84 and 85).

⁹The argument in this paragraph works from the premise of a fairly strong doctrine of divine determination of the Bible's contents. Even if we allow for a less determined process, however, the questions of why the Samuel books were found (humanly) worthy of preservation and what God might like us to do with them remain.

can treat the books of Samuel as an experiment in the consequences of attributing all events (including famines, plagues, wars, and babies' deaths) to God. In Samuel, such attribution results in a rather capricious and wrathful characterization of God—something to keep in mind when deciding how to talk about God's involvement in contemporary events. The books also teach us something about what happens to people's ideas of God when a particular person or group makes too-strong claims that God is on their side. On the other hand, it is interesting to ask whether our learnings about God in Samuel are limited to the things the books say *about* God. The God spoken *about* seems unconcerned with Paltiel's tears (2 Sam 3:15–16) and the ten concubines “living as if in widowhood,” yet someone cared enough to report these details. Beyond the God described *by* the narrator (a God rather narrowly concerned with David) does there stand a God who does care about the impact of David's actions upon these “little people” and sends their stories through history to us? Even if Solomon's propagandists have had a major shaping influence on the text, many points of view find articulation within their work. Might God's word to *us* sometimes be found amidst the minor voices?

At the end of every Samuel course I ask, “How do you feel about this? We've looked at ugly stuff and asked troubling questions. Was it only hurtful, or has something helpful happened? Should I continue to teach this course?”

The answer has always been yes, with the further comment that “it brought the Bible to life.” (Interesting phrasing: Was the Bible “dead” before, or just deadeningly boring?) When I press students further about their learning, they do not list moral or theological “lessons” of the kind usually expected from Bible study. Instead they speak of encounters: with characters who rose three-dimensional from the pages, with each other in spirited class interactions, and with a God who is present in but also beyond the ideologies and agendas of David, Solomon, the biblical writers, and ourselves.

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Modern scholarship has underscored the diversity of the Bible's writings (even the diversity of its “takes” on David). Some parts of the Bible may provide just the sorts of “moral examples,” “theological lessons,” and “words of comfort” that Christians seem to expect. But need all parts function in these ways? The Samuel books can, even (and perhaps especially) when understood as political propaganda, get people interested in the Bible, talking to one another, and vigorously searching for God's ways in the world. Are not these valuable outcomes, workings worthy of the “word of God”? Should we not add such encounters to our list of things that we expect from the Bible? Sometimes, indeed, the Bible will “teach us”

in a dogmatic sense. But sometimes, I propose, it promotes love of God and neighbor most powerfully through the engagements it fosters. In questioning the perhaps politically motivated assertions that the Samuel writers make about God, we may actually draw closer to the living God whose word we seek. ⊕

MARTI J. STEUSSY is an ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), MacAllister-Petticrew Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, and author of David: Biblical Portraits of Power (University of South Carolina Press, 1999).