

Estimates of the Character of David

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Even the most casual reader of the Old Testament would probably pick up a two-sided impression of King David, as on the one hand a great man with many good qualities, and yet a man who on at least one occasion, the Bathsheba affair, showed himself to be the very reverse of an ideal ruler. Probably the casual reader would see the former side of the picture as the dominant one, but that might depend on one's subjective reaction to deeds of adultery and murder. In any case, it might not be too easy to decide, in the black-and-white terms of Sellars and Yeatman, whether David was "a good thing" or "a bad thing".

1. The Pre-critical Estimate

It is nevertheless clear enough that the traditional viewpoint concerning David has been largely favourable. In an extended entry on David in the Westminster Dictionary of the Bible, for example, one half-sentence suffices for the black side of the picture: "Though at times David committed deep-dyed sins, for which the early and comparatively dark period of the Church's history in which he lived and his own deep penitence are his only defense, yet his general fidelity to Jehovah was such" (and the positive assessment is resumed).

There are one or two significant points here. Firstly, the writer feels it his moral duty in some way to "defend" David; secondly, he finds it a little difficult; thirdly, he is driven to appeal to the "early" and "dark" period in which David lived (i.e., people did not really know better in those days); fourthly, it is implied (by the use of the word "general") that quantitatively David's virtuous behaviour was typical of the man - the "deep-dyed sins" were thankfully rare; and fifthly he emphasizes that

David showed "deep penitence".

Most of these angles could have been drawn directly from the Books of Samuel. To suggest that David's period was a dark age is a rather modern and perhaps naively arrogant standpoint, but it is certainly the case that in 2 Sam. 12:13 David expresses his penitence, or at least confesses his sin as regards Bathsheba and Uriah. And the sorry Bathsheba episode occupies a relatively small part of the many chapters dedicated to the story of David, so that the quantitative argument is easily made.

On further analysis, however, it is clear that this sort of estimate of David is based not only on the portrait of him in the books of Samuel but no less upon other Old Testament material about him. The quantitative argument is powerfully reinforced by the well-known fact that the books of Chronicles suppress the whole Bathsheba episode: 1 Chron. 20:1 reproduces 2 Sam. 11:1, but then the Chronicler jumps immediately to the material found in 2 Sam. 12:36. The penitential argument, which rests on just a single verse in Samuel (2 Sam. 12:13), is built up strongly by the famous penitential psalm to be found in the Psalter as Ps. 51, which is not only attributed to David but explicitly linked to the Bathsheba episode by the Psalm title.

It was of course natural enough, indeed inevitable, for Jewish and Christian tradition to draw its portrait of David from all the biblical materials available. Within the Old Testament tradition itself, it was no less natural for the portrait of David to become a rosier one with the passage of time, and for a halo to be set about his head. One major factor in this development was undoubtedly the fact that the Psalter as a whole came to be associated with his name. The books of Samuel notice David's musicianship at the beginning of his story (1 Sam. 16:16-23), though as an instrumentalist not a composer; and almost at the end of his story they incorporate two psalms of his (2 Sam. 22:2-23:7). The second of them goes so far as to call him "The sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 Sam. 23:1 RSV), though

this sense is open to dispute.¹ But otherwise this is an aspect of David's life which is irrelevant to the narratives of Samuel. There can be little doubt that in course of time the rich religious and spiritual content of the Psalter added a whole dimension to the way in which David was perceived. A brutal and self-seeking ruler could well have written a book like Mein Kampf; but if a book of deeply devotional poetry came to be linked with the name of Adolf Hitler, our descendants might well be inclined to revise the image of Hitler which they had inherited from the "historical books", so to speak, of our time. Small wonder, really, that David came to figure among the "heroes of faith" listed in Heb. 11 in the New Testament.

In some quarters,² attempts have been made to exculpate David even further. It has sometimes been argued that no decent woman would have engaged in toilet activities on her all-too-visible rooftop - in other words, David was more the victim than the aggressor. It is hard to know what the cultural norms were in ancient Jerusalem, of course, and nothing is said in 2 Samuel as to Bathsheba's attitudes, thoughts, feelings or morals. But even if we follow this exegetical option, we do not in fact greatly benefit the portrait of David; if he was not greedy and wilful, then he was weak and easily led. However, the thrust of Nathan's parable strongly suggests that he was the former rather than the latter: he is there portrayed as the rich man who made away with his poor neighbour's ewe-lamb. There is not the slightest hint that the ewe-lamb had any say in the matter.

2. The Historian's Estimate

If it was natural for the layman, Jewish or Christian, to utilize all the biblical data in building up his

1. Hebrew n^e'[^]im zimrôt yiśrā'ēl could mean "the favourite of the songs of Israel" (RSVmg), i.e. their hero rather than their composer, but this seems less likely in context and is not generally preferred.

2. See for instance Keil and Delitzsch, Biblical Commentary on the Books of Samuel, (1950 edition), p. 383.

portrait and interpretation of David, it was equally predictable that the modern critical historian would do otherwise. Plainly for him the books of Samuel constitute the primary source of information, with Chronicles very much secondary, and anything else negligible. Moreover, he would scarcely take even Samuel at face value, and by the very nature of his trade he would want to investigate whether the hero of yesteryear had after all feet of clay.

If one takes an objective standpoint, then, being as ready to accept the immoral or amoral deeds of David as any virtuous ones, one finds that much of the career of David, as recorded in Samuel, is rather ambiguous. If one adopted a thorough-going cynicism, one might end up with a remarkably black view of David, something like this:

Finding himself (by whatever route) at Saul's court, David quickly developed political aspirations, and set about undermining Saul's authority. He unscrupulously manipulated two of Saul's family, Jonathan and Michal, to further his ambitions, setting both of them against their father. Saul was not deceived, however, and forced David to flee from the court. David's response was not to flee into exile, however, but to raise a marauding band of guerrilla soldiery, who lived by ruthlessness, treachery, and a blatant protection racket in southern Judah. A rich farmer who tried to thwart him was attacked and killed - and David did not hesitate to marry the rich widow. Without the slightest conscience, David next switched his allegiance to the Philistines, offering his troops' services as mercenaries. Quite possibly he raided Judaeen farms and settlements, and he may even have fought against the Israelite army at the battle of Gilboa. Nevertheless he succeeded in overtures to the tribe of Judah, and as a result managed to take the throne of Judah, when by rights it should have owed allegiance to Saul's son and successor Ishbosheth (or Eshbaal). He then fought against the latter and engineered his downfall by means of machinations with several of Ishbosheth's senior officers. He thus achieved the throne of the whole of Israel, upon which he speedily eliminated these officers, and in due course found a pretext for decimating the survivors of Saul's family.

Once he had defeated the Philistines in battle, he proved just as ruthless and opportunist in his relationships with other local states, and thus created an empire for himself. Against all this, his treatment of Bathsheba and Uriah, far from being the black spot on an otherwise impeccable career, seems almost negligible by comparison, a trifling peccadillo.

Nobody could deny David's skills as soldier and politician, but his later history as king tells a story of vacillation, weakness, incompetence, vindictiveness and so forth - a man unable to control his own palace and its inmates.

In practice few historians, or commentators on the books of Samuel, would go so far as all this.³ On some issues a majority of scholars would give David the benefit of the doubt, and on some others would be content to shrug, as when M. Noth, for instance, talks of "the not entirely unwarranted suspicion that David ... engineered the murder of Abner".⁴ None the less, the historian's estimate of David is inevitably coloured by at least some of these suspicions about his actions and his motives. In particular, most commentators take the view that he was responsible for butchering most of Saul's family. Not only does 2 Sam. 21 record that David issued the orders for their execution, but 2 Sam. 16:7f. goes further and offers us the description of him as "a man of blood", with particular reference to "the blood of the house of Saul".

While historical certainty is unattainable, and a case can still be made for justifying or at least excusing David in these various episodes in his career, one or two points can now be made. First, the material for a revised estimate of David's character comes quite naturally out of a consideration of the actual data contained in the books of Samuel, as I have just illustrated in the case of the

3. But see T. Ishida, The Royal Dynasties in Israel, 1977, pp. 55-63, for an unusually hostile assessment of David.

4. Cf. M. Noth, History of Israel² (1959), p. 185.

execution of Saul's family. Secondly, as soon as one restricts one's vision to the books of Samuel, a lower estimate of David becomes much more plausible. The Psalter may give an impression of David as a saintly man; the books of Samuel offer the reader a very human figure.

A factor contributing to the historian's view of David, I suspect, is the recognition that a fair amount of material in 1 Samuel, in particular, is plainly apologetic. In other words, the writer or writers of the block of material telling the story of David's rise to the throne knew only too well that some of David's early history was open to more than interpretation; and set out to defend if not to improve his image. In our modern world of so much blatant propaganda, some of it utterly false and most of it based at best on half-truths, we tend to get cynical as soon as we get a whiff of apologetics: the tag "s'excuse, s'accuse" tends to govern our response. We should, however, beware of becoming too cynical in our handling of the data incorporated in the books of Samuel.

3. The Literary Approach to the Story of David

(a) The Theological Mode

We turn from the realm of historical inquiry as such, which sought to establish what David actually said and did and to assess his motivation, to a rather different question, namely, how is David presented in the books of Samuel? And what did the author or authors seek to convey to the reader? There would be general agreement that the answers to such questions must be found within the framework of the purposes of the deuteronomists, who were responsible for the whole corpus of the Deuteronomic History, Judges - Kings.

One of the most detailed treatments of 2 Samuel from this point of view is that of R. A. Carlson.⁵ There had been a marked tendency in earlier literary-critical scholarship to treat the last four chapters of 2 Samuel

5. Carlson, David the Chosen King (1964)

(chs. 21-24) as an appendix, almost a mere appendage, to the story of David, and so to ignore their relevance to the central chapters of the book, the so-called Court History of David. Carlson remedied this, emphasizing how thoroughly integrated the whole of 2 Samuel is. Our concern here is the presentation of David that results from a treatment like Carlson's. He sees the material as falling into two unequal halves, chapters 1-8⁶ and chapters 9-24 respectively, and he entitles these two segments as "David under the Blessing" and "David under the Curse" respectively. The deuteronomists, says Carlson, had a clear didactic purpose in this, to demonstrate how inexorably nemesis overtakes a king who wilfully departs from obedience to Yahweh. In Carlson's analysis, David emerges as accorded primarily a negative evaluation - the deuteronomists set out to be thoroughly critical of him. Nevertheless they did recognize that unlike so many of his successors "he never apostatized to the worship of strange gods" and "that he was faithful to Yahweh's Covenant".⁷

Thus we receive yet another assessment of David's character; and a question of some interest poses itself. How did early readers of the books of Samuel envisage the character of David? Did they see him as basically a saint and hero, whose occasional lapses served chiefly to throw his virtues into relief, and perhaps served also to show that he was human after all? Or did they bring to bear a somewhat detached and even cynical view of his activities? (After all, the ancients were well aware of the propensities of kings.) Or did they see him as the exemplar of a potentially great man who strayed from the straight and narrow and paid for it ever after?

Or the question might be posed differently: did the reader's judgement depend upon the estimate of David he brought to the material - his prejudice, if you like - or was his judgement formulated by the material in front of him? The latter possibility seems to constitute the basis of our final technique for analysing the books of Samuel, namely the non-theological literary approach.

6. In point of fact, Carlson excludes ch. 1 and ch. 8 from his analysis.

7. Ibid., p. 258.

(b) The Non-theological Mode

A considerable number of authors have by now produced purely literary analyses of Old Testament narratives, bringing new techniques (new, at least, in the sphere of biblical criticism) and eliciting new insights. More than one literary critic has handled sections of the story of David, but for present purposes it will suffice to concentrate on one, Peter D. Miscall, whose recent monograph The Workings of Biblical Narrative is largely concerned with 1 Sam. 16-22, the early history of David. Carlson did not concern himself with 1 Samuel, but perhaps one could legitimately extrapolate and suggest that the story of David's rise to the throne, in 1 Samuel, must be part of the depiction of "David under the Blessing".

If Carlson would so argue, it is abundantly clear that Miscall would not. He insists, on the basis of what literary specialists nowadays call "a close reading" of the narrative, that David is portrayed as a wholly ambiguous character from the very outset. Miscall was not of course the first scholar to notice the moral dubiousness of David's conduct at Nob and in Gath, in his deliberate deceit of first Ahimelech and then Achish, but he goes far beyond this observation. Even in 1 Sam. 17, the famous story of David and Goliath, it seems that David is not unequivocally presented as a pious and courageous youth, willing to risk all in the cause of Yahweh and Israel. It is just as possible to "read" him as an arrogant schemer and a gambler. David's brother Eliab, after all, was very critical of him, so the reader must take such a portrait seriously. In fact, we are never told by the narrator which scenario (if either) is right.

And so Miscall continues, concluding in his "Postscript" that a "determinate reading" of David must be impossible: the text offers no "specific portrayal" of David, and he suggests that any determinate portrait of David drawn by another scholar would have to be in defiance of the text.⁸ The text is ambiguous and is meant to be ambiguous. The David we meet in the Deuteronomic History

8. Miscall, op. cit., pp. 140f.

is a man whose character defies any attempt at assessment. If so, then presumably it would be improper to draw any morals whatever from the story of David - though Miscall does not say so.

4. The Portrait of David

While these various modes of approach to the biblical story of David are very different, they may combine to leave us with the impression that the character of David is wholly elusive and beyond our recall; and of course this could be true as regards the historical David, depending on our view of the evidence. But is the story (putting aside the question of historicity) really so ambiguous as Miscall, in particular, insists? It is of course beyond doubt that David's career - in history or in story - was a checkered one, as even the most adulatory traditional view of him must admit. Even saints have their defects, and nobody would expect otherwise. So up to a point the portrayal of David as having his ups and downs, his virtues and his failings, is only true to life - plausible and credible. But it seems to me that Miscall's position is essentially very different from this: he seems to be equating at the literary level David's ups with his downs, his virtues with his failings. Thus not only David's character but the entire story of his career becomes ambiguous. Can this really be the biblical authors' intention?⁹

Against this position I would wish to make a number of points. In the first place, one must surely consider the total effect or impression of the story as a whole. Generations of readers have found David to be a sympathetic character, someone they could empathize with; indeed, it took the skills of modern scholarship to throw up a different and blacker view of him. Moreover, the very fact that later biblical tradition about David heightened his virtues and tended to ignore his failings and failures

9. I am not fully clear whether Miscall claims to be discussing literary intention or literary effect (possibly unintentional), but it seems to me the thrust of some of his argument demands the former as its basis.

shows that this was the general impression he had left behind him.

Secondly, it appears that Miscall's approach is predicated on the supposition that the first readers of the books of Samuel were a tabula rasa on which the biblical author could record any impression he chose. But in reality many traditions about David must have been current in Israel before the books of Samuel were read. Who did not know something of the story of David and Goliath, for instance? If so, David will already have been a folk-hero, and it is most unlikely that any early reader of 1 Sam. 17 will have taken Eliab's criticisms of David seriously. If the reader of today is to take those criticisms "seriously", as Miscall insists we must, then they may reflect just as easily on the character of Eliab, as jealous, quarrelsome, untruthful - in any case, unfit to be king, as the previous chapter has already hinted.

Thirdly, it may be questioned whether the fact that the motives of David are rarely alluded to or hinted at implies that the biblical writers intended us to see them as ambiguous. This emphasis on action and word rather than on thought and purpose is typical of Old Testament narrative style. If we were to apply Miscall's viewpoint in a thorough-going fashion, we should probably make every character in the Old Testament ambiguous, and it is scarcely credible that the biblical writers set out to convey that impression. Were there no heroes or villains? It would make more sense, surely, to look for clues and pointers in the narrative which would guide the reader as to how the author wished him to perceive the character on stage. That is not to exclude the possibility that at times - with some episodes or some characters - the authors were quite happy to leave matters undefined and ambiguous; but we should be awake to such pointers as there may be. One further point needs consideration before examining some of the data: we must allow for the possibility of moral judgements on the part of the narrator which might differ from our own. This consideration is particularly relevant to the story of David's deceit of Achish (1 Sam. 21, 29). Would an ancient Israelite reader have faulted

David for pulling the wool over the eyes of an enemy of Israel? More probably he would have admired his skill in thus manipulating Achish; indeed, the episode could suggest that David was destined to be a better king than Achish, more shrewd and skilful in handling men. Again, the total extermination of the Amalekites recorded in 1 Sam. 27 might seem barbaric to us, but scarcely so to an ancient Israelite. In passages such as these the narrator would scarcely have felt the need to supply a moral commentary, and certainly not an excuse for David's conduct.

We first encounter David in 1 Sam. 16, which recounts in some detail his anointing at the hands of Samuel. The narrative is at some pains to emphasize that David was Yahweh's choice, not Samuel's, and that Yahweh "looks on the heart". Miscall remarks that the narrative does not indicate what Yahweh saw in David's heart; but, however concisely, the point is adequately made that because of what Yahweh saw in David's character, he chose him to be Israel's next king, and bestowed his Spirit upon him. A few verses later, in the course of the next pericope, we are given a human evaluation of David, apparently on the lips of an objective witness, a member of Saul's entourage: David, he claimed, was not only a skilful musician (which the situation demanded) but - and in context this information is gratuitous - "a man of valour, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and Yahweh is with him". Miscall's "close reading" does not overlook this verse (verse 18), to be sure; but by some alchemy which eludes my understanding, he makes it a less than positive evaluation of David. For Miscall, it already contains hints of David's affair with Bathsheba, for instance; but they are far from obvious.

Thus before David has said a word or performed a deed, the reader is given a frame of reference for him; and it is one, moreover, which accords with any preconceived portrait of David which the reader would have brought to the text.

Let us now move to the other end of the story of David as we find it in the books of Samuel. In the

intervening chapters, if we follow Carlson's schema, David's period of blessing has been overtaken by the era when he was "under the curse". Does the story end, then, with an unhappy backward look at the man who started so promisingly? On the contrary, 2 Sam. 23 presents a glowing picture of David's royal role: he had ruled "justly" and "in the fear of God", and is likened to the beneficial sun and rain (vv. 3ff.). Carlson's schema is in fact too simplistic, too black-and-white; certainly many chapters in 2 Samuel describe the punishment David endured in consequence of his sin, but the category "David under the curse" surely overstates it. David can be seen as overcoming his many troubles, and emerging a sadder, but wiser, man. Clearly the compiler of 2 Samuel saw nothing incongruous in placing the two psalms of chapters 22f., with their high view of David, at the end of the whole Bathsheba affair and its sequel.

As for Miscall's handling of David, he tends to neglect the other characters in the story; this not only robs the story of considerable human interest but also opens the way for some misinterpretation. To return to the Goliath story, where (as we noted) Miscall urges us to pay attention to David's brother's sharp criticisms of David. Are we simply to shrug and say, "Eliab could very well be right"? Rather we ought to ask, "What do we know about Eliab?" The narrator has already introduced him to the reader in the previous chapter as a deceptively attractive man who God has "rejected". He is then a man whom the attentive reader will instinctively distrust, however plausible he may appear. He had initially deceived Samuel but the reader is forewarned - and Miscall ought not to have been deceived either!

There is then considerable reason for challenging Miscall's treatment of David. The portrayal is not a sequence of completely ambiguous presentations, but rather a mixture of good deeds and bad which can be recognized as such. Why is it that the average reader tends to play down the bad deeds? The reason is not only one of general impressions and a positive evaluation in the framework of the story; quite consistently when David's acts appear in

a bad light, he is portrayed as expressing his penitence. Thus when he was indirectly responsible for the death of the priests of Nob, he is said to have faced up to the fact and admitted it, before making what small amends he could (1 Sam. 22:22f.). When he was only just deterred from butchering Nabal and his family, he pronounced a blessing on Abigail, who had averted his bloodthirsty vengeance (1 Sam. 25:32ff.). When he was rebuked by Nathan for his adultery and murder, he confessed simply and unequivocally "I have sinned against Yahweh" (2 Sam. 12:13). When his census brought about pestilence in Israel (as he believed), he again confessed his sin and moreover made intercession for his suffering people (2 Sam. 24:17).

It seems clear enough, then, that the compiler took a positive view of David's character, and so did the writer or writers who included or added these penitential touches here and there in the narrative. Was this in fact the compiler himself, transforming less favourable material by such touches? This would seem unlikely in all instances. For instance, David's confession after the slaughter at Nob is surely essential to the flow of the narrative; he is in conversation with Abiathar, a survivor of that massacre, and he could hardly pass over his own role in the affair in total silence. The very fact that Abiathar had gone to David for refuge is also a clear indication of the view that the narrator took of David. Similarly the Bathsheba narrative, which depicts Nathan as rebuking the king, must always have included some response by David.

It was not just an editor, then, gazing at David through rose-tinted spectacles, who represented him in a way that would attract the reader's sympathy and general approval. The narrators do so too. As noted above, the whole block of material in 1 Samuel concerned with David's rise to the throne is apologetic in character; it may be a fair deduction from this that in reality there was something to hide, or rather some things to be explained, but we should not overlook the fact that the narrator at any rate was on David's side. The early chapters of 2 Samuel are plainly written in some admiration of David's achievements, especially against the Philistines; no critic of

him is at work here. The so-called Court History of David is another matter, and it may be that the author of these chapters was less well disposed towards the central figure of them. However, there is little consensus among scholars as to the precise purpose of these chapters, and it could not be confidently affirmed that they are hostile to David; conceivably they are hostile to the monarchy as such, but that is a different issue.¹⁰

My own reading of them accords closely with the interpretation offered by D. M. Gunn. Noting the roles played in the narratives by Shimei and Abishai, he argues that "David ... cannot accept the view of Abishai that repayment and retribution is for man to take into his own hands. On the other hand ... he is not prepared to bow to a hopeless determinism, as though once cursed he can hold out no further hope of a life beyond that curse Thus he fully affirms Yahweh's authority and involvement but rejects the ready assumption that we know how that manifests itself He does not deny his own offence; rather he looks at the possibility that Yahweh in his graciousness may choose to dispense with a rigid connection between guilt and judgement." Gunn then concludes that "the story of King David ... affirms the presence of Yahweh and his involvement in human affairs ... and above all points to the radical generosity with which he can break the expected order of things. In this last respect we come close to David himself. Perhaps, for our author, Yahweh is rather like David."¹¹ If so, "our author" is clearly not representing David in a definitively bad light in this central core of the David narratives.

The remaining chapters of 2 Samuel, with 1 Kings 1f., are not wholly in David's favour, perhaps, but in the story of his execution of Saul's family we find again a strongly apologetic note: David had no option, we are told. In

10. For a brief discussion of the "Tendenz" of these chapters, cf. R. P. Gordon, 1 and 2 Samuel (1984), pp. 86f.

11. D. M. Gunn, The Story of King David (1978), pp. 109f. His discussion owes much to W. Brueggemann's study of 2 Sam. 16 in CBQ 36 (1974), pp. 175-192.

1 Kings 1f. the portrait is morally neutral, to my mind, probably because David is now a spent force, and the central figure is no longer David but Solomon.

At the literary level, then, I would argue that David's character may need rehabilitation. It should not be misinterpreted either because of historical insights or because of recent literary analyses. Indeed, the same portrait of David which was built up in Jewish and Christian tradition on the basis of the whole of the Old Testament data can be seen in embryo in 1 and 2 Samuel. The penitential note is struck, as we have seen; and his activity as a psalmist is incorporated in 2 Samuel 22f. The difference is not so much one of character as of texture. Again, David Gunn expresses the point neatly when he says that our story-teller "has a powerful, yet sympathetic, sense of the faulty of man, and this, I believe, sums up his treatment of David, the 'hero' of the story ... it remains the case that David is the one truly engaging character in the story."¹²

5. The Historical David

Is there any possibility of going back behind the literary David to assess the character of the historical David? Plainly there are difficulties and uncertainties; the major problem is that there is no extra-biblical evidence to serve as a control for our interpretations of the biblical material. However, few would dispute the basic facts of David's life and career; it is his motivation which is more open to dispute. One point in favour of the general historicity of the story told in 1 and 2 Samuel is that facts such as David's temporary friendship with a Philistine king, his involvement in the Nob massacre, his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, are recorded. If so, there is little reason to adopt a cynical stance and accuse David of many more disreputable actions, such as overt rebellion against Saul, and treachery in all directions.

12. Ibid., p. 111

The major question is the extent to which we should accept the apologetics of some of the biblical narratives. For instance, are we to put all the blame on Saul's pathological jealousy for his breach with David, as 1 Samuel suggests, or was David secretly plotting against the king? If ultimately this question cannot be resolved, we can still reasonably point out that at any rate the books of Samuel, despite their drawing on several sources, present the reader with a consistent picture of David and also a consistent picture of Saul. There seems good reason to believe that David did on at least one occasion have the opportunity to kill Saul, and deliberately refrained. In fact, there are two such stories, in 1 Sam. 24 and 26; and R. P. Gordon neatly makes the point that whether there was originally one such incident or two, the two narratives constitute "a double affirmative of David's innocence", since the narrator must have inherited both stories.¹³

We can then proceed to deduce that if David went so far as to spare Saul's life on occasion, it is scarcely likely that he was in fact a rebel against him. It is certainly not implausible that Saul - whose monarchy rested on no very secure basis - had become fearful, suspicious and finally murderous towards a man of ability who was attracting such popular attention. Thus the broad general picture of David's rise is perfectly credible, and probably more credible than any alternative (and purely speculative) reconstruction of events.

Similarly there is good reason to think that Abner's death was a positive embarrassment to David; if David really did engineer the assassination, we would have to say that he timed it very badly, and it seems simpler to give David the benefit of the doubt.

An examination of other episodes again permits us to suppose that some modern interpretations may be over-critical of David. The phrase "protection racket" is very easy to apply to David's activities in southern Judah described in 1 Sam. 25, but this modern analogy, smacking as it does of the Mafia, rather overstates the case. It is

13. Cf. R. P. Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

at any rate clear that David had sufficient friends in Judah for him to be chosen as their king, in preference to Saul's son and successor, on Saul's death in battle.

Ultimately, then, it seems likely that David's character was not much different from the one portrayed for us in 1 and 2 Samuel. We must be careful, however, to recognize both sides of the character who is portrayed there. He is certainly no plaster saint. Indeed, one good reason for taking the portrait in Samuel seriously is that David appears there as a rounded and complex character - a normal human being, in fact, though plainly a talented leader of men. If ecclesiastical traditions have been prone to turn him into something super-human, that is because they have neglected or toned down the evidence of the books of Samuel.¹⁴

14. See Gordon's monograph for a comprehensive and up-to-date bibliography on the books of Samuel.