

# Evaluating King David: Old Problems and Recent Scholarship

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DAVID A. BOSWORTH

Barry University

Miami Shores, FL 33161

THE TENDENCY TO CONSIDER the Books of Samuel as didactic literature, propaganda, ideology, or apology has had unfortunate consequences for the reputation of King David. David has long been a controversial figure, and the interpretive tradition has generally been admiring. Modern scholarship, however, has taken a critical turn. The Enlightenment philosopher Pierre Bayle's article on David in *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697) concentrated on David's moral failures and challenged the traditional interpretation of David as a hero. In recent forms of this modern trend, David has been presented as a bloodthirsty tyrant or terrorist.

In the present article I will review some recent scholarship on David in light of long-standing problems concerning his evaluation and suggest that the evaluation of David has less to do with David than with prior ideas about the nature of the biblical narrative. Both traditional and critical reconstructions of David have suffered from a selective reading of the text and have offered portraits of David that lack nuance and imagination.

## I. The Problem

Biblical scholars in the twentieth century have characterized David in one of two seemingly contradictory ways. The traditional version characterizes David as a pious shepherd who rises to become the king of Israel. The critical version presents David as a cunning usurper who murders and schemes his way to a throne not rightfully his. The first characterization arises from a "naïve" or "straight-forward" reading of the biblical text. The second arises from a "hermeneutic of

suspicion” reading “against the grain of the text.” In fact, the biblical text allows both readings, and they are not as contradictory as may at first appear.

The characterization of the pious David follows the apologetic tone of the biblical narrative. It draws attention to David’s merits as described in the Bible and minimizes the seriousness of his faults. For example, David M. Howard, Jr., assesses David in glowing terms: he is “a shrewd military strategist and motivator” with “political skills”; he is a “poet, musician, and sponsor of music” whose “fine religious sensitivity” is manifested, among other ways, by “his ready repentance when confronted with his sin.”<sup>1</sup> D. F. Payne also minimizes David’s shortcomings: “The chief flaws one can discern in his character are his deceitfulness (which was, however, a common trait, and probably thought to be more of a virtue than a failing by his contemporaries), his indulgence toward his sons, and of course his actions where Bathsheba was concerned. While his adultery cannot be condoned, with this glaring exception he was in every way the ideal ruler.”<sup>2</sup>

While the “naïve” reading minimizes David’s flaws and magnifies his virtues, recent critical scholars have taken an opposite tack. Modern interpreters have long challenged the presentation of David as a hero, and a critical appraisal of David has become standard in the field.<sup>3</sup> More recently, however, this criticism has been sharpened to the point that David is understood as a Stalin-like tyrant.<sup>4</sup> This understanding of David as a “man of blood” (cf. 2 Sam 16:7-8) depends heavily on the biblical text behind which it claims to have penetrated. Although scholars view the biblical narrative as a generally positive portrait of David, they claim that the murderous and ambitious historical David was a remarkably different man from the pious literary figure. The procedure for producing the “historical David” is not complicated in its general outline. First, the fundamentally “apologetic” or “propagandistic” force of the text is recognized. Second, the text is read to discern the accusations against David that may have motivated the apologetic tone of the narrative. In reference to murder, for example, the text goes to some length to show that David is not involved in the deaths of Abner (2 Sam

<sup>1</sup> David M. Howard, “David,” *ABD*, 2. 41-49, here 48.

<sup>2</sup> D. F. Payne, “David,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 1. 870-76, here 876. Similarly, J. M. Myers, “David,” *IDB*, 1. 177-82.

<sup>3</sup> John Bright (*A History of Israel* [3rd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981]) largely follows the biblical narrative in his retelling of David’s story, but he recognizes that David is “ambitious” (p. 193) and “devious” (p. 194). Similarly, Martin Noth (*The History of Israel* [2nd ed.; trans. P. R. Ackroyd; London: A. & C. Black, 1960]) recognizes that David was a “shrewd man” (p. 181) who sought the kingship “deliberately and consistently from the very beginning” (p. 179). Although Noth follows the biblical version of events, he sees that suspicions of David’s involvement in murders are “not entirely unwarranted” (p. 185).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Baruch Halpern, *David’s Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); and Steven L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). See below.

3:6-39) or Ishbaal (2 Sam 4:1-12) from which he benefits. This fact suggests that some people suspected that David was behind these murders and that the narrative is designed to answer this accusation. Third and finally, the historical reconstruction goes on to assume or suggest that the accusations are true and the apology a lie. This procedure leads to a historical David who is a photographic negative of the biblical portrait. David is found guilty of all the crimes against which the narrative defends him. This kind of inversion does not bring us closer to the historical figure than the naïve reading. Both result in simple one-sided portraits that do not seem true to the complexities and shades of gray discernible in our own experience or better-documented history.

These two portraits of David seem diametrically opposed and irreconcilable. Below I will argue that both portraits arise from a selective reading of the biblical text and, as they reconstruct a two-dimensional David, lack historical imagination. First, I will review some recent literature on David. Second, I will discuss some problems with historical reconstructions by appealing to better-documented and analogous historical circumstances.<sup>5</sup> Third, I will compare the biblical presentation of David's monarchy with ancient Near Eastern presentations of royal figures to show that the biblical literature is not as simple as propaganda.

## II. David among the Biblical Scholars

The critical description of David outlined above may be found in varying degrees in several recent books devoted to David. Although the scholarly literature on David is enormous, I will focus on a few recent and substantial works.

Baruch Halpern dedicates his book *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* "to Aunt Claire, for the whoops of horror it occasioned." Aunt Claire may not have been prepared for a portrait of David that departs so far from the traditional evaluation. Other readers have whooped at the book's sometimes humorous prose and bold claims.<sup>6</sup> Halpern draws on his previous scholarship to write this monumental work on David as a prelude to a history of Israel that he will write for the Anchor Bible Reference Library. Halpern deploys several arguments to establish two related claims: (1) the narratives in Samuel date to the tenth or ninth centuries, and (2) the narrative is an apology for David. He establishes the first point by means of a variety of arguments. For example, full or *plene* spellings in Hebrew are known to be relatively late. The concentration of

<sup>5</sup> Such examples discussed below will include Constantine "the Great," Julian "the Apostate," Catherine "the Great" of Russia, and Henry II of England.

<sup>6</sup> The work has been well received among reviewers. Ryan Byrne (*BASOR* 330 [2003] 87-89, here 88) notes, "This is a pioneering tome, both in breadth and style, which will provoke, prod, and placate lay and scholarly readers alike. Few meaty books like this come along in a decade, and undoubtedly none funnier."

defective spellings of David's name (דוד) in Samuel indicates that the text is earlier than the *plene* spellings (דוד) common in Chronicles.<sup>7</sup> The second point draws on prior scholarship, especially the work of P. Kyle McCarter.<sup>8</sup> Following McCarter, Halpern notes the many convenient deaths that pave the way for David's rise to the throne and the ways in which the text distances David from these deaths. These two points establish for Halpern that the biblical narrative about David was written shortly after his death in order to legitimate his rule and therefore his dynasty. He does not pretend that the text is a straightforward journalistic account of David, but he does find it sufficiently ancient that, if used appropriately, it is a valuable source for the history of the united monarchy. The critical historian must recognize the apologetic tone of the narrative and the tendency of rulers to overstate their accomplishments. With these caveats in mind, one may begin to construct the history of the united monarchy.

It remains to be seen how Halpern will present David in his history of Israel, but the volume on David prepares for a thoroughly negative portrait. In his discussion of the nine deaths from which the narrative seeks to distance David, Halpern outlines the means, motive, and opportunity David may have had to arrange the executions. His concern is not whether David actually committed the murders, but how the narrative lays the blame at someone else's feet. Consequently, what emerges is a scheming David who orchestrates murders while maintaining plausible deniability for himself. Halpern's suspicions extend even to Absalom's rebellion. He suggests that David may have instigated Absalom's rebellion as a pretext for consolidating his control over the northern tribes. Furthermore, the apology for David is so thoroughgoing that the one crime of which David is directly accused is a fabrication. The purpose of the Bathsheba story is to establish that David, not Uriah, is the father of Solomon. Halpern thinks that the narrative may have derived from Bathsheba herself. In his introduction, Halpern indicates that his book will reconstruct David as his enemies saw him. Enemies,

<sup>7</sup> Halpern draws on prior scholarship on this point, but seems to have overlooked David Noel Freedman's "The Spelling of the Name 'David' in the Hebrew Bible," in *Biblical and Other Studies in Honor of Robert Gordis* (ed. R. Aharoni; HAR 11; Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1983) 89-104, reprinted in Freedman, *Divine Commitment and Human Obligation: Selected Writings of David Noel Freedman*, volume 2, *Poetry and Orthography* (ed. John R. Huddleston; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997) 108-22. In his review of Halpern, Byrne complains that the volume includes "regrettably fewer citations of prior scholarship than is customary on numerous contestable historical and textual matters. Halpern's efforts to coordinate the textual and archeological data are laudatory (and in many cases convincing), but they can appear cavalier with respect to his historical assumptions about anonymous material culture" (p. 88).

<sup>8</sup> P. Kyle McCarter, "The Apology of David," *JBL* 99 (1980) 489-504, reprinted in *Reconsidering Israel and Judah: Recent Studies on the Deuteronomistic History* (ed. Gary N. Knoppers and J. Gordon McConville; Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 8; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000) 260-75.

Halpern notes, can be paranoid about each other, so perhaps it should not be surprising that *David's Secret Demons* reads like the work of a conspiracy theorist. If the biblical text offers a photograph of David, Halpern reconstructs the negative.

Steven L. McKenzie's book *King David: A Biography* is a historical work similar to Halpern's volume but aimed at a different audience. Part of McKenzie's purpose "is to make available to a broad audience views that most scholars have long held."<sup>9</sup> He notes that some scholars have denied the existence of David, but he maintains that David was a historical person and that a biography of sorts may be written about him. McKenzie's biography fills a void in the literature on David. There have been many works on David, who is often called the most interesting and vivid character in the Bible. Most of these works, however, are either historical texts that are too scholarly for a general audience or inspirational or artistic texts that are not concerned with history. McKenzie fills this lacuna with a current and accessible book that offers to a lay audience a clear picture of scholarship on David. Halpern's volume, which was published months after McKenzie's book, is too technical to compete with McKenzie's work in this regard. The portrait of David that it offers, however, is substantially the same: David was a tyrant and a murderer.

McKenzie understands the biblical narrative as an apology for the same reasons that Halpern does: he has read McCarter and sees that an apology may bring us close to David chronologically (i.e., it may have been composed shortly after his death) and historically (i.e., the specific accusations answered by the apology give us a reasonably accurate picture of what David did). Like Halpern, McKenzie presumes David guilty of a variety of murders. McKenzie's thorough skepticism results in an image of David that is almost the opposite of that provided by the biblical text. Although McKenzie begins by explaining that he will read the Bible "between the lines" and "against the grain," he concludes by claiming that his unflattering portrait of David "is truer to the Bible than the more traditional images of David that have been formed along the trajectory begun by the apology" because the Bible does not deny David's humanity.<sup>10</sup> By so completely inverting the biblical presentation, however, McKenzie reconstructs a half-truth. Although the text acknowledges David's dubious qualities, it also evaluates his rule positively. Although the pious tradition of David the upright hero is a simplistic idea in need of revision, the claim that David was a terrorist or a tyrant after the pattern of Joseph Stalin seems to be another simplistic idea.

Like McKenzie's book, Marti J. Steussy's *David: Biblical Portraits of Power* "addresses readers who are interested in critical biblical scholarship but do

<sup>9</sup> McKenzie, *King David*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

not necessarily have advanced training in it.”<sup>11</sup> Even so, she includes twenty-three pages of end notes and a fourteen-page bibliography of English-language sources.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the work of McKenzie and Halpern, however, Steussy’s volume is not a direct contribution to the history of Israel. Rather, she explores the various portraits of David offered by the biblical text. Since she is not interested in historical reconstruction, she is not confined to the books of Samuel in her discussion of David. Although the largest section of the book deals with David in Samuel, she also includes chapters on David in Chronicles and in Psalms. Unfortunately, her discussion of David in relation to the messianic prophetic texts is abbreviated.<sup>13</sup> Although not concerned with reconstructing either the historical David or the history of the biblical text, Steussy is not hostile to historical criticism and at times adopts some of its conclusions. For example, she rehearses current scholarship concerning the relation of Chronicles to Ezra-Nehemiah and provides a survey of the Psalter. Still, Steussy manages to keep her discussion of the textual portraits of David separate from questions about what historical circumstances may have motivated those portraits.

The portrait of David that Steussy constructs from the Books of Samuel is more sophisticated than those offered by Halpern and McKenzie. She is aware of McCarter’s argument that the narrative is an apology for David, but she directs her critical attention to aesthetic literary concerns in the text rather than historical matters behind the text. She shows how elements of the text display David as an “innocent and attractive hero,” but then continues to show how other aspects of the narrative add human dimensions to David: he is a shrewd political operator of suspect motives who is a mixed blessing to his people. She identifies in detail how the text compares David and Saul. The two kings share several similarities: both are good men (1 Sam 9:2; 15:28) chosen by God (1 Sam 9:15-17; 1 Sam 16:1, 12) and anointed by Samuel (1 Sam 10:1; 1 Sam 16:13). Sometimes their similar actions are evaluated differently: offering sacrifice leads to Saul’s rejection (1 Sam 13:8-14), but David’s sacrifices are acceptable (2 Sam 6:13, 17; 24:25). Finally, certain differences between Saul and David imply that Saul is the better man. For example, Saul does not multiply wives for himself as David does (cf. Deut 17:17). **In summary, Steussy’s treatment of David is evenhanded and respectful of the various indications in the text. Consequently, her portrait is not as one-sided as those of Halpern and McKenzie.**

The tendency to evaluate David negatively is not confined to English-language scholarship. The valuable work edited by Louis Desrousseaux and

<sup>11</sup> Marti J. Steussy, *David: Biblical Portraits of Power* (Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament; Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999) 8.

<sup>12</sup> McKenzie’s bibliography is slightly longer and includes a few non-English sources. Halpern’s volume lacks a bibliography but includes an index of modern authors.

<sup>13</sup> Steussy, *David*, 191-93. The introduction (p. 6) seems to promise more.

Jacques Vermeulen, *Figures de David à travers la Bible*, includes sixteen articles on David as portrayed in the OT, ancient Jewish literature (including the LXX and Qumran), the NT, and Islamic tradition.<sup>14</sup> The three articles concerning the narratives of Samuel generally conform to the pattern of Halpern and McKenzie: the narrative is an apology that permits some insight into the historical David.<sup>15</sup> The articles of Walter Dietrich collected in *Von David zu den Deuteronomisten: Studien zu den Geschichtsüberlieferungen des Alten Testaments* show more awareness that the biblical narrative is sophisticated literature.<sup>16</sup> One article, “Das biblische Bild der Herrschaft Davids,” has not been previously published and shows how the biblical picture of David is not as simple as apology because it includes criticisms of David. I will return to this article below.

### III. David among the Usurpers

The conclusion that the historical David murdered his way to the throne seems problematic to me for three reasons: (1) David may have had good political reasons for abstaining from the kinds of crimes against which the apology defends him; (2) political leaders may be accused of far more crimes than those of which they are actually guilty; and (3) the view assumes a dichotomy between piety and *Realpolitik*. The first two points concern problems with reconstructing the historical David. The third point bears on the related problem of evaluating David.

The historical construction of David that depends on turning an apology into an indictment and the indictment into history fails to account for the complexities of politics in any age. An assumption frequently implicit in the reconstruction is that David could have no good political reasons for refraining from the crimes against which the apology defends him. Therefore, if the accusation was made, it must have been true. The Enlightenment philosopher and pioneer of modern biblical scholarship Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677), however, discusses political lessons derived from Scripture and suggests political reasons why a person seeking to seize a throne might wish to refrain from regicide:

<sup>14</sup> Louis Desrousseaux and Jacques Vermeulen, *Figures de David à travers la Bible: XVIIe congrès de l'ACFEB (Lille, 1er–5 septembre 1997)* (LD 117; Paris: Cerf, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> The three articles are Jacques Briand, “Les figures de David en 1 S 16, 1–2 S 5, 3” (pp. 9–34); Jacques Vermeulen, “La maison de Saül et la maison de David” (pp. 25–74); André Wénin, “David roi, de Goliath à Bathsabée” (pp. 75–112).

<sup>16</sup> Walter Dietrich, *Von David zu den Deuteronomisten: Studien zu den Geschichtsüberlieferungen des Alten Testaments* (BWANT 156; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), esp. “Das biblische Bild der Herrschaft Davids” (pp. 9–31).

The successor [to an executed monarch] will be a tyrant not by choice, but by necessity; for how will he be able to endure the sight of the citizens' hands reeking with royal blood, of the people rejoicing in regicide as in a glorious deed, a deed perpetrated as a warning for him alone? Surely, if he wants to be a king . . . he must avenge the death of his predecessor, and for his own sake make an example that will warn the people against daring to repeat such a crime.<sup>17</sup>

Spinoza's golden rule of regicide applies to David's execution of the Amalekite who claims to have killed Saul (2 Sam 1:1-16). The narrative consistently shows David refusing to take the throne by regicide and identifying regicide as a crime against Yhwh (1 Sam 24:3-7; 26:8-12; 2 Sam 1:11-16). The narrator shows David creating an aura of holiness around the throne that will become his. The notion that Yhwh's anointed is sacrosanct may help explain the endurance of David's dynasty and the infrequency of regicide in Jerusalem (in contrast to Samaria). This narrative may be a defense against the charge that David had a hand in Saul's death. Refraining from regicide, however, may be as politically useful as committing it. Consequently, there is no firm basis for preferring the accusation to the defense.

It may be helpful in this context to recall other examples of political murder. An appreciation for the complex possibilities surrounding David's potential involvement in the deaths of Saul and Ishbaal may be found by examining similar events in better-documented circumstances. Moreover, the evaluation of David has been further complicated by the fact that his story occurs in the Bible, so comparison with nonbiblical historical figures may provide parallel examples without canonical complications. Considerable ink has been spilled concerning the death of St. Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>18</sup> He was murdered in his cathedral by four barons from the court of King Henry II.<sup>19</sup> Evidently these men acted independently of the king. Henry and Becket had been engaged in a long dispute concerning the prerogatives of church and state, and their contest was magnified by personal animosity and fueled by former friendship. Henry complained of Becket in strong terms, prompting the four barons to confront Becket. It is unclear whether the men acted on their own authority in confronting Becket, or whether Henry sent them. In either case, Henry seems not to have authorized Becket's murder. They murdered Becket in his cathedral, where Becket was interred as a martyr, and his tomb became a popular pilgrimage destination (as in

<sup>17</sup> Benedict Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise* (trans. Samuel Shirley; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998) 217; originally published in 1670.

<sup>18</sup> David Knowles, *Thomas Becket* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1970); Thomas M. Jones, ed., *The Becket Controversy* (Major Issues in History; New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1970); W. L. Warren, *Henry II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Frank Barlow, *Thomas Becket* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> Although sometimes represented as lesser knights, the men were substantial barons.

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*) until the Anglican reformation made Becket a less politic martyr. Partisans of Becket have claimed that Henry ordered the murder, although this is unlikely. Henry reportedly responded with dismay to the news of the murder and later admitted his responsibility (for his inciting words) and performed penance that satisfied Pope Alexander III. Like Henry II, David may have been accused of a murder that he did not commit. David's obvious aim to become king, however, necessarily puts the lives of Saul and Ishbaal in danger, if not from David directly, then from David's partisans. The analogy of Thomas Becket's death indicates the plausibility of the biblical account of the deaths of Saul and Ishbaal. The fact that the biblical text absolves David of responsibility for a murder does not mean that David was guilty of that murder.

Furthermore, David may have been accused of more crimes than he actually committed. Therefore, the author of the narrative may seek to defend him from crimes of which he is not guilty. (Conversely, he may be guilty of crimes about which the author knows nothing.) Several deaths clear David's path to the throne, and his opponents (and supporters) may have assumed that he was implicated in those deaths. It is possible, however, that Ishbaal was actually murdered by opportunistic foreigners who mistakenly expected David to reward them, as the text reports (2 Samuel 4). The life of David is not well documented, so historical conclusions must involve a considerable measure of subjective judgment. Again, an illustration from better-documented history may be helpful. Catherine the Great (1729–1796) usurped the throne of Russia from her husband Peter III (d. 1762). Catherine's contemporaries assumed that she was guilty of ordering the execution of her husband, among others. Contemporary documents, however, tell a different story. Concerning the death of Peter, a letter from Alexei Orlov to Catherine, written shortly after Peter's death, "informed her of the bloody deed, took full responsibility for it, and begged her forgiveness."<sup>20</sup> Possibly Catherine's co-conspirators inferred that she wanted Peter dead but could not give the order. His death was officially attributed to a "hemorrhoidal colic." More famously, Catherine supposedly executed "Princess Tarakonova," a woman who suggested that she had a claim to the throne. The "princess," whose real name is unknown, died of consumption while in imperial custody. Elaborate romantic stories of the princess and her execution at Catherine's orders have served as a basis for novels, films, and paintings.<sup>21</sup> Finally, Catherine was also widely believed guilty of

<sup>20</sup> John T. Alexander, *Catherine the Great: Life and Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 15. The letter was discovered in 1881. See also Zoé Oldenbourg, *Catherine the Great: A Biography of the Woman Who Became Empress of All the Russians* (trans. Anne Carter; New York: Random House, 1965) 249-54; Carolly Erickson, *Great Catherine* (New York: Crown, 1994) 226-29.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander, *Catherine*, 180-82.

ordering the execution of Ivan VI, who was briefly tzar under his mother's regency (1740–1741) before he was removed and imprisoned. Catherine's husband, Peter III, had left secret orders with Ivan's guards that he should be killed if he attempted to escape. Catherine confirmed these orders, and Ivan was accordingly killed by his guards when a conspiracy tried to free him from prison and put him on the throne. Catherine's official account claimed that Ivan was insane and implied that the conspirators were responsible for his death (which, in a way, they were).<sup>22</sup> More examples of Catherine's alleged brutality could be cited. I rehearse this history only to show that any number of accusations may surround a usurper and many of them may be false. Catherine's own propaganda was by no means scrupulously honest as it tried to clear her of murder charges, but her lies do not make her a murderer. Similarly, the apologetic tone of David's rise is not proof (or even evidence) that he murdered his way to the throne.

The reconstruction of the "historical David" does not get behind the text so much as it draws out its implications. The straightforward, pious reading is blind to those implications. The critical reading takes these implications for the truth. Of the two readings of David, neither fully describes the presentation of David in the narrative of the Books of Samuel or a plausible historical David. Unlike the biblical authors, interpreters assume a dichotomy between piety and *Realpolitik*: one may be pious or politically practical, but not both. The text, however, is not so simple. Some scholars have perceived this problem in their discussion of the formula "Yhwh was with David" (1 Sam 18:12, 14, 28). This statement is normally adduced as evidence that David is morally upright.<sup>23</sup> Steussy appropriately questions this assumption and correctly notes that this formula primarily indicates David's success, not his moral character.<sup>24</sup> Steussy, however, still assumes that there should be a connection between success and good morals, so her discussion tends to impugn the justice of Yhwh rather than conventional human notions of justice. She thus joins other scholars who argue that the biblical narrative offers a negative evaluation of Yhwh.<sup>25</sup> A more adequate characterization of

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 89-94; Erickson, *Great Catherine*, 265-66.

<sup>23</sup> For example, H. L. Knoll, *The Faces of David* (JSOTSup 242; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 52.

<sup>24</sup> This expression is often followed by notice of the individual's success (Gen 39:2, 3, 23; Judg 1:22; 2:18; 2 Kgs 18:7). Similarly, readers often assume that the statement "God was with Joseph" is an indication of Joseph's moral excellence, especially since the statement brackets his temptation (Gen 39:2, 3, 21, 23). In contrast, Yiu-Wing Fung (*Victim and Victimizer: Joseph's Interpretation of His Destiny* [JSOTSup 308; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000] 12-14) argues persuasively that the statement concerns Yhwh's assistance, not Joseph's moral quality. Yhwh is also said to be with Ishmael (Gen 21:20), Abraham (21:22), and Isaac (26:3, 24, 28), but these passages cannot be taken to show the characters as moral individuals.

<sup>25</sup> Lyle M. Eslinger, *Kingship of God in Crisis: A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1-12* (Bible and Literature 10; Decatur, GA: Almond, 1985); David M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Inter-*

David would have to consider seriously both the explicit and implicit indications in the text. The “apology” of David may be a sophisticated narrative that strives to legitimize his rule and his dynasty even as it acknowledges ugly political realities.

Niels Peter Lemche appropriately places David in the context of other great leaders in history, such as Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar.<sup>26</sup> Examples of such leaders may elucidate the biblical portrait of David. Great leaders are frequently praised for their successes and blamed for the means by which they achieved them. Ultimately, the praise or blame that attaches to these figures has more to do with their success or failure. For example, the titles of Constantine “the Great” and Julian “the Apostate” might be reversed had Christianity vanished and paganism remained. These two figures are instructive because the polemic and legend surrounding them resemble the issues surrounding David.

In some respects, the life of Constantine the Great parallels that of King David. Both men became military leaders, took thrones, experienced family problems, established new capital cities, and instituted innovations in public religion for which they are celebrated by posterity. Both men have also been reconstructed by critical historians in unflattering ways. Constantine has been the subject of extensive study through the centuries because of the extraordinary significance of his reign.<sup>27</sup> Before his rule, Christians were persecuted by a pagan empire. Under Constantine and his successors, however, Christianity became an accepted and ultimately dominant religion. As one scholar remarks, legends grew around Constantine because “European civilization turned on the axis of this man’s reign.”<sup>28</sup> These legends, though, have obfuscated the historical record. The

*pretation of a Biblical Story* (JSOTSup 14; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980) 123-31; David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 87-89.

<sup>26</sup> Niels Peter Lemche, “David’s Rise,” *JSOT* 10 (1978) 2-25, here 18: “David was evidently not a saint, but a normal, if very successful, ruler of a type which has its parallels all through world history.”

<sup>27</sup> Eusebius *Life of Constantine* (trans. with introduction and commentary by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall; Clarendon Ancient History Series; Oxford: Clarendon, 1999); Eusebius *Oration in Praise of Constantine*; Socrates *Ecclesiastical History*, book 1; Sozomen *Ecclesiastical History*, books 1-2; Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (2 vols.; Great Books of the Western World 40-41; Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952) chaps. 14-18; Jacob Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great* (trans. Moses Hadas; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1949) originally published in 1852; Christopher Bush Coleman, *Constantine the Great and Christianity: Three Phases: The Historical, the Legendary, the Spurious* (Studies in History, Economics, and Public Law 146; New York: Columbia University Press, 1914); Samuel N. C. Lieu and Dominic Montserrat, eds., *Constantine: History, Biography, Legend* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Karen Piepenbrink, *Konstantin der Große und seine Zeit* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Coleman, *Constantine*, 103.

most notable Constantinian mythmaker is Eusebius, whose *Life of Constantine* celebrates the emperor as a pious prince whose every motive was religious and whose very faults were excesses of virtue.<sup>29</sup> Modern critical historians have been understandably suspicious of this interpretation of Constantine. After all, this king executed his son, Crispus; his wife, Fausta; and his brother-in-law and eastern rival, Licinius (after swearing that Licinius would not be harmed). By seeking to discredit the incredible reports of Constantine's piety, some critical scholars have reconstructed an alternative interpretation that seems a similar falsification of history. Perhaps none has attacked the pious legend as vehemently as the nineteenth-century Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt. For Burckhardt, Constantine was "a murderous egoist" and "usurper" who cared nothing for justice or piety and whose sole principle was ambition.<sup>30</sup> According to more balanced historians, this dark and tyrannical figure exists "only on the pages of overly-skeptical historical critics."<sup>31</sup> In other words, the critical reconstruction sometimes resembles the interpretation of Constantine's enemies, but it is not therefore historical. Similarly, the negative portrait of David outlined above does not yield the historical insight that it claims.

Julian poses a problem that is the inverse of that posed by Constantine. Critical scholarship has sought to penetrate the praise of Constantine for a more plausible portrait. In the case of Julian, it is slander that must be overcome to paint a reasonable picture of this energetic emperor.<sup>32</sup> Fortunately, the work of the non-Christian historian Marcellinus Ammianus survives to counterbalance the negative image of "the Apostate" that comes down through Christian writers.<sup>33</sup> Like Constantine, Julian was talented and ambitious. Edward Gibbon remarks that "the generality of princes, if they were stripped of their purple and cast naked into the world, would immediately sink to the lowest rank of society, without a hope of emerging from their obscurity. But the personal merit of Julian was, in some

<sup>29</sup> Eusebius (*Life of Constantine* 4.54-55) obliquely acknowledges that Constantine sided with the Arian heretics, but defends the emperor's error as due to his trusting nature.

<sup>30</sup> Burckhardt, *Age of Constantine*, 250-52, 282.

<sup>31</sup> Coleman, *Constantine*, 99.

<sup>32</sup> Socrates *Ecclesiastical History*, book 3; Sozomen *Ecclesiastical History*, books 5.1-6.2; Paul Allard, *Julien L'Apostat* (3 vols.; Paris: Victor Lecoffre, 1903); Samuel N. C. Lieu, ed., *The Emperor Julian: Panegyric and Polemic* (Translated Texts for Historians, Greek Series 1; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1986); Giuseppe Ricciotti, *Julian the Apostate: Roman Emperor 361-363* (trans. M. Joseph Costelloe; Milwaukee: Bruce, 1960; reprint, Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1999); G. W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); René Brauns and Jean Richer, eds., *L'Empereur Julien: D'histoire à la légende* (2 vols.; Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1978); Marion Giebel, *Kaiser Julian Apostata: Die Wiederkehr der alten Götter* (Düsseldorf: Artemis & Winkler, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> Ammianus, *Rerum gestarum libri* (trans. John Carew Rolfe; 3 vols.; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935-39).

measure, independent of his fortune.”<sup>34</sup> He was a capable administrator and an exceptional military leader. He first gained the loyalty of his troops in Gaul, then set out to become emperor “conscious that only success could justify the attempt.”<sup>35</sup> As emperor, he issued a decree of religious toleration similar to Constantine’s previous Edict of Milan, but hypocritically fomented persecution of Christians. His writings displayed his meanness and vindictiveness as much as his eloquence, and his excursions into philosophy were derivative. His ambition ultimately led Julian to his death (only twenty months into his reign) in an unnecessary war against Persia, which he waged to rival the glory of Alexander. Julian possessed several qualities desirable in a ruler that make him an attractive figure, but his demerits do not permit one simply to reverse the judgment of Christian historians that his short reign was an unpleasant hiccup in the progress of Christianity. The portrait of Julian “the Apostate” offered by his ancient Christian enemies needs critical revision. One may similarly expect that reconstructing what David’s enemies thought of him is not the same as reconstructing David.

Such talented and ambitious leaders as Constantine, Julian, and David have always posed a problem: greatness is not the same as goodness. Great leaders have a mix of good and bad qualities. They are motivated by ambition and vision. In order to fulfill their ambitions, they commit crimes, and to realize their vision, they usurp old institutions to build new ones. David’s ambition is evident in his rise to power, and his vision is manifest in his exercise of that power. He associated the ark of Yhwh with his capital and his dynasty. He established a centralized authority over Israel that differed significantly from both judgeship and the judgelike pattern of Saul’s monarchy. He thereby created the conditions in which Yhwh’s promises to the ancestors might be fulfilled.<sup>36</sup> In these promises and the mutual association of Yhwh, Jerusalem, and David’s dynasty, David left his mark on the OT and gave shape to the NT. In order to found his famous dynasty, David reshaped prior patterns of government in Israel. His desirable innovations led to

<sup>34</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, chap. 22, p. 343.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

<sup>36</sup> On the positive period of Solomon’s reign as Israel’s golden age, see Gary N. Knoppers, *Two Nations under God: The Deuteronomistic History of Solomon and the Dual Monarchies* (2 vols.; HSM 52, 53; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993) 1. 57-168. Knoppers argues that “1 Kings 11 clearly marks a new and negative phase in Solomon’s rule” (p. 135). James W. Flanagan (*David’s Social Drama: A Hologram of Israel’s Early Iron Age* [JSOTSup 73; Sheffield: Almond, 1988]) notes how the biblical narrative uses the themes of ark and house to legitimate David’s innovations: “David is now the symbol of Yahweh’s presence in Jerusalem. He is the new Moses, the new Joshua, and the new ark, the permanent representative of Yahweh among the people” (p. 231, cf. pp. 247-49). Carol Meyers (“David as Temple Builder,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* [ed. Patrick D. Miller et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987] 357-76) argues that David did indeed plan to build a temple and elaborates on the significance of such a plan for the centralization of the state.

his positive evaluation, but his consequent usurpation of older institutions suggests a negative evaluation.

#### IV. David among His Contemporaries

The biblical narrative shows a sophisticated handling of David's accomplishments and usurpations by indicating both the positive and negative aspects of his career. This balanced presentation of David contrasts with ancient Near Eastern presentations of royal figures. Walter Dietrich examines these parallels in order to evaluate the image of David's kingship in its ancient Near Eastern context.<sup>37</sup> Although Dietrich finds several parallels, he also notes that the biblical narrative shows several significant differences from ancient Near Eastern presentations of monarchy. These comparisons may be categorized in five areas: the nearness of the king to the divinity; the king's personal merits; the king's dynastic descent or popular support, or both; the king's success against foreigners; and the king's success at home. In each area, the biblical portrait of David shares the propagandistic or apologetic force of ancient Near Eastern texts, but also allows criticisms of David not common in the wider literature. The summary below will draw on some of the inscriptions employed by Dietrich and some not discussed by him. The parallels could easily be multiplied.

Ancient Near Eastern texts regularly present kings as close to the gods, who choose the king to be the ruler. Famous royal hymns celebrate the Sumerian king Shulgi of the Ur III dynasty.<sup>38</sup> The god Enlil "chose Shulgi in (his) pure heart, he entrusted the people to him. The lead-robe and staff he hung on his arm—he is (henceforth) the shepherd of all the lands."<sup>39</sup> In an inscription commemorating the construction of the wall of Sippar, Hammurapi identifies himself as "King of Babylon, reverent one, who heeds the god Shamash, beloved of the goddess Aia, who contents the god Marduk, his lord, by the supreme might which the god Shamash gave to me."<sup>40</sup> The inscription of Azitawatas identifies him as "the Sun-

<sup>37</sup> Dietrich, "Das biblische Bild."

<sup>38</sup> Shulgi (2094–2047) consolidated the Third Dynasty of Ur, founded by his father, in southern Mesopotamia. His reign is extensively documented. See Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East: c. 3000–330 BC* (2 vols.; Routledge History of the Ancient World; London: Routledge, 1995) 1. 58–70; *ANET*, 584–86; *Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions, Monumental Inscriptions and Archival Documents from the Biblical World* (ed. William W. Hallo et al.; 3 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1997–2002) 1. 172; 2. 139 (hereafter identified as *COS*). The numbers for *COS* identify the volume and the number of the inscription.

<sup>39</sup> *COS*, 1, no. 172.

<sup>40</sup> Douglas Frayne, *Old Babylonian Period (2003–1595 BC)* (The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia: Early Periods 4; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) 335. Hammurapi

blessed man, [the god] Tarhunza's servant."<sup>41</sup> Idrimi's life parallels that of David. Idrimi had to flee his native city, but raised a following in exile and returned to claim the throne. In his autobiographical inscription, Idrimi claims to be the servant of deities. He regularly consulted the gods until he received divine support for his bid for kingship: "I released birds and examined sheep entrails. The weather god turned to me in the seventh year and I built ships."<sup>42</sup>

Like these monarchs, David is presented as close to Yhwh, whom he consults before every significant decision (1 Sam 23:2, 4; 30:8; 2 Sam 2:1; 5:19; cf. 2 Sam 22:10, 15). David's closeness to Yhwh contrasts with Saul, to whom Yhwh refuses to speak (1 Sam 14:37; 28:6); however, David's relationship with Yhwh is not always sunny. Yhwh condemns David's conduct in the Bathsheba affair (2 Sam 12:1-12) and denies David's plan to build the temple (2 Samuel 7). These kinds of ruptures in the king-deity relationship are not a standard part of the ancient Near Eastern presentations of royalty. Their presence in the biblical text indicates a criticism of David that is not characteristic of royal propaganda.

Ancient Near Eastern texts normally celebrate the personal merits of the monarch that indicate his worthiness to sit on the throne. The striking inscription of Kilamuwa begins by listing several of the king's royal ancestors and indicating in each case that his predecessor "achieved nothing." The alleged inactivity of these kings contrasts with Kilamuwa's vigorous rule and the list of his many achievements: "what I achieved (my) predecessors had not achieved."<sup>43</sup> In his inscription, Azitawatas praises his own virtues: "every king made me father to himself because of my justice and my wisdom and my goodness."<sup>44</sup> The inscription of Panammu, who became a vassal of Assyria, praises the deceased king: "on account of his wisdom and because of his loyalty, he then seized onto the skirt

(1792-1750) was king of Babylon. His military expeditions late in his reign made him ruler of most of Mesopotamia. He is best remembered for his law code.

<sup>41</sup> *ANET*, 653-54; *COS*, 2, nos. 21, 31. Azitawatas was king of Azitawaya (modern Karatepe in south central Turkey) after 705. He left an inscription in Phoenician and parallel hieroglyphic Luwian in which he characterizes his reign as peaceful and prosperous. See Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East*, 2, 413-15.

<sup>42</sup> *ANET*, 557-58; *COS*, 1, no. 148. Idrimi (early fifteenth century) is known from a statue on which an autobiographical inscription describes his exile from Aleppo and rise to the throne in Alalah in the northern Levant. See Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East*, 1, 289-91. On autobiographical inscriptions, see Edward L. Greenstein, "Autobiographies in Ancient West Asia," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (4 vols.; ed. J. Sasson; New York: Scribner, 1995) 4, 2421-32 (hereafter *CANE*).

<sup>43</sup> *ANET*, 654-55; *COS*, 2, no. 30. Kilamuwa was contemporary with the Assyrian king Shalmaneser II (840-830). He is known from a Phoenician inscription describing how he "hired" Assyrian help to combat his enemies. Sam'al is located north of Alalah in southern Turkey. See Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East*, 2, 460-61.

<sup>44</sup> *COS*, 2, nos. 21, 31.

(robe) of his lord, the mighty king of Assyria.”<sup>45</sup> Occasionally inscriptions indicate personal merits of kings even if those merits are not specifically royal. For example, Shulgi boasts of his musical skill, and Ashurbanipal of his ability to read and write.<sup>46</sup>

The biblical narrative shows several of David’s personal merits. In his youth, he was a good shepherd not afraid to face lions and bears (1 Sam 17:34-37). His encounter with Goliath indicates his skill with a sling (1 Sam 17:48-49). His courage and military ability are renowned (1 Sam 18:7, 30; 2 Sam 17:2-10). Despite these positive traits, David is also a man prone to excessive violence, lust, and deception. The narrative shows him in his weakness, grief, and humiliation. The human touches in the biblical account are the features that often draw readers to David as a full, rounded, and vividly drawn character with human weaknesses as well as greatness. These human touches, however, are not characteristic of ancient Near Eastern royal inscriptions. Their presence in the biblical text has some purpose different from the royal propaganda known from the surrounding nations.

One means by which ancient Near Eastern texts establish the legitimacy of a king’s reign is through stressing the monarch’s royal descent and popular support. The popular support may be especially emphasized if the king lacks royal ancestors. Idrimi, whose royal claim was subject to doubt, stresses how his people and allies came to greet him when he arrived to claim the throne. He also presents his exile as unjust and his brothers as do-nothings, content to live as nonroyal citizens.<sup>47</sup> Kilamuwa establishes the legitimacy of his reign through his royal descent, and his greatness through contrasting his achievements with the lackluster record of his ancestors.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Shalmaneser III identifies himself as “son of Shurnasirpal (II)” and describes his northern campaign: “I smashed out with copper picks rough paths in mighty mountains which rose perpendicularly to the sky like the points of daggers (and) into which no one among the kings my fathers had ever passed.”<sup>49</sup> By contrast, in another inscription, Shalmaneser III celebrates the achievements of his illustrious ancestors Ashurnasirpal II, “exalted

<sup>45</sup> *COS*, 2, no. 37. Panammu is known from an inscription of his son Bar-Rakib, who describes how his father survived a coup, escaped to Assyria, and regained his throne with Assyrian help. See Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East*, 2, 461-62.

<sup>46</sup> See Jacob Klein, “Shulgi of Ur: King of a Neo-Sumerian Empire,” in *CANE*, 2, 853; and Laurie E. Pearce, “The Scribes and Scholars of Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *CANE*, 4, 2277.

<sup>47</sup> *COS*, 1, no. 148.

<sup>48</sup> *COS*, 2, no. 30.

<sup>49</sup> A. Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC II (858–745 BC)* (Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia: Assyrian Periods 3; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 8. Shalmaneser III (858–823) was king of the Neo-Assyrian empire whose reign was occupied by constant military campaigns, known from his several inscriptions.

prince, whose priesthood was pleasing to the gods” and “(who) subdued all the lands at his feet,” and Tikul-Ninurta II, “who slew all his enemies and annihilated them like a flood.”<sup>50</sup> The popularity of Panammu is evident from the description of his death in battle: “Even [his lord, Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, wept for him;] and all his relative kings wept for him; and all the camp of his lord, the king of Assyria, wept for him.” When his body was sent home, “his whole house wept for him.”<sup>51</sup>

The biblical narrative makes an effort to show David’s popularity as one means among several of indicating the legitimacy of his rule. Almost everyone who meets him loves him. He forms close ties with members of Saul’s house, which compensates in part for his lack of royal ancestry. He inaugurates his reign over Judah and then Israel by making covenants with the people, who invite his rule (2 Sam 2:4; 5:1-5). Crowds celebrate his policy of moving the ark of Yhwh to his capital (2 Sam 6:12b). The text also notes, however, significant dissent from David. He has difficulty overcoming loyalty to Saul’s house and is never able to fully unify Judah and Israel. His ultimate triumph depends on the sword, for which he is called “a man of blood” (2 Sam 16:10). His son Absalom is able to foment a significant rebellion, which drives David out of his capital. These frank admissions of David’s unpopularity are highly unusual in ancient Near Eastern royal propaganda. They tend to undermine or counterbalance the indications of his popularity.

Success against foreigners is one of the most important achievements expected of a king. Ancient Near Eastern inscriptions describe how the monarch succeeds in war and diplomacy. Neo-Assyrian inscriptions frequently celebrate at length the king’s military campaigns, leaving a militaristic impression of the Neo-Assyrian empire. Kilamuwa boasts that he defeated enemies more powerful than himself and became “in the hands of the kings like a fire consuming the beard and like a fire consuming the hand.”<sup>52</sup> Panammu is described as a king who organized his army, led it to victory, and extended his territory. His subservience to Assyria seems a strength rather than a weakness because it is in the best interests of his people. Assyria treated him well, and his vassalage allowed him the opportunity to display his loyalty.<sup>53</sup> Azitawatas boasts, “I made horse upon horse, and I made army upon army, and I made shield upon shield, all by Tarhunza and the gods. So I broke up the proud, and the evils which were in the land I removed out of the land.”<sup>54</sup> He also extended his rule over his neighboring kings.

<sup>50</sup> Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers*, 44.

<sup>51</sup> *COS*, 2, no. 37.

<sup>52</sup> *COS*, 2, no. 30.

<sup>53</sup> *COS*, 2, no. 37.

<sup>54</sup> *COS*, 2, nos. 21, 32.

David is notoriously skilled in war. He attains high rank in Saul's court and leads the armies of Israel on many successful engagements against the Philistines. Later, as an outcast from court, David leads his band of followers on various raids while avoiding Saul's armies. He gains the ascendancy over the forces of the house of Saul so that they defect to David's cause. Through successful diplomacy, he engages the protection of the Philistine king of Gath against Saul. When he succeeds to the throne, he negotiates treaties with Phoenicians (2 Sam 5:11; 1 Kgs 5:1-3) and cities as distant as Hamath in central Syria (2 Sam 8:9-12). David's successes, however, are not without blemishes. As king, David sends Joab out to campaign alone and arrives only in time to take the credit for capturing Rabbah (2 Sam 11:1; 12:26-29). David's loyal followers turn on him when the Amalekites raid their base at Ziklag after David leaves it undefended, although David makes good the loss (1 Samuel 30). That David seems always at war in the narrative raises questions about how successful his campaigns were and how extensively he may have drained his country's resources.

Ancient Near Eastern inscriptions highlight the successes of kings at home. These achievements often come in the form of building infrastructure, establishing justice, helping the poor, and taking credit for national prosperity. Azitawatas claims credit on all fronts: "on the frontiers, where there were bad men, robbers, . . . I, Azitawatas, put them under my feet . . . and even in those places which were formerly feared, where a man fears to go on the road, so in my days even women walk with spindles."<sup>55</sup> He built forts to consolidate control of his territory. He "established justice in the land" and "caused Adanawa to prosper . . . and in my days there was plenty and luxury and good living."<sup>56</sup> Idrimi directs attention to how his success in war funded his building activity and how his building activity helped the people: "I made my inhabitants who were in the midst of my land dwell in better dwellings. Those who (formerly) did not dwell in dwellings, I made them do (so). I established my land. I made my cities as they were previously with our fathers."<sup>57</sup> Hammurapi's famous law code begins with a lengthy prologue celebrating the king in terms that include the following: "the gods Anu and Enlil, for the enhancement of the well-being of the people, named me by my name: Hammurapi, the pious prince, who venerates the gods, to make justice prevail in the land, to abolish the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak."<sup>58</sup>

David's success on the home front does not extend through all these activities. He builds a palace for himself in Jerusalem, where he houses the ark and lays plans for a temple (2 Samuel 6-7). He appoints priests and government officials,

<sup>55</sup> *COS*, 2, nos. 21, 31.

<sup>56</sup> *COS*, 2, nos. 21, 31.

<sup>57</sup> *COS*, 1, no. 148.

<sup>58</sup> *COS*, 2, no. 131.

which indicates his interest in a functioning bureaucracy and, by extension, justice (2 Sam 8:15-18; 20:23-26). The text makes no claim concerning the wealth of David's Israel; this comes with Solomon's more pacific policies (1 Kgs 4:20). David's concern for justice and the poor is not sufficient to prevent Absalom's rebellion, which is grounded in part in the lack of justice (2 Sam 15:1-6). David does not prevent dissension within his nation or his family, and his rule is marred by civil strife arising from his inattention to establishing justice.

Dietrich's short comparative study illuminates the biblical literature. The biblical portrait of David does include elements characteristic of propaganda; it presents David in positive ways that tend to legitimate his rule. The narrative also includes, however, negative aspects that cast doubt on David's moral quality (and therefore his legitimacy). In other words, the text is not as simple as "royal propaganda."<sup>59</sup> It shows an awareness of the problems involved in evaluating great figures who succeed in establishing positive institutions at the expense of usurping prior institutions.

## V. Conclusion

David is the kind of great leader that worried Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln warned that "towering geniuses" would not be content merely to perpetuate political institutions. Such ambition "thirsts and burns for distinction; and, if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves or enslaving free men."<sup>60</sup> America's founders, argues Lincoln, were precisely such men, whose good reputation rested on their success. Like other great figures, they transgressed boundaries. To praise such individuals would seem to legitimate their usurpations and undermine the value of stability and respect for law. To blame them for their usurpations, however, would seem to preclude the legitimacy of desirable innovation. Hence, evaluating great leaders such as David is not a simple matter.

<sup>59</sup> In his positive review article of Halpern's *David's Secret Demons*, Walter Dietrich ("Der historische David—Sein oder Schein?" *Bib* 84 [2003] 108-17) does not exploit his own work to critique the idea of the biblical literature as propaganda, as I have done above. By the above comparisons, I do not mean to make elaborate claims about Israel's uniqueness. I will note, however, that we might look for Israel's uniqueness in its literature rather than in (alleged) historical *realia*, because Israel developed its literature in order to express and reinforce its uniqueness. See Peter Machinist, "The Question of Distinctiveness in Ancient Israel: An Essay," in *Ah, Assyria: Studies in Assyrian History and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography Presented to Hayim Tadmor* (ed. Mordechai Cogan and Israel Eph'al; ScrHier 33; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991) 196-212. A lengthy list of biblical texts expressing Israel's distinctiveness appears in n. 22 on pp. 203-4.

<sup>60</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Address to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois: The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," in *idem, Speeches and Writings* (2 vols.; ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher; Library of America; New York: Viking, 1989) 1. 28-36, esp. 34.

The tendency to simplify the sophisticated biblical presentation of David derives in part from certain assumptions about the nature of the biblical text. Those who see David as a pious hero generally believe that the Bible is didactic literature that offers moral lessons and examples. Those who read David as a murderous villain ground their arguments in the claims that the Bible is ideological literature and that the narratives about David constitute a propagandistic apology for David. The interpretive tradition has flattened David because it has flattened the text that is our only source of information about him. Although the Bible offers a nuanced portrait of David, interpreters have tended to concentrate on only one aspect of the multilayered text. The assumption that Scripture is a simple text (didactic or propagandistic) composed by simple ancients is in need of revision. Although ideological and similar forms of criticism have shed light on some aspects of the text, this partial illumination has sometimes been mistaken for something more.

Further, I would like to note the basic conservatism (concern for stability and preservation of the status quo) of those who evaluate David, whether they see him as a hero or a villain. Those who celebrate David as a pious hero also feel the need to explain that his story does not provide a biblical basis for rebellion against established authority. Although David may be himself a usurper, his example must not be permitted to encourage other usurpers.<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile, those who see David as a usurper but not as a hero blame him precisely for his usurpation. In both these contrasting pictures of David, no value is placed on his innovation because it appears to be a dangerous precedent.<sup>62</sup> This assumption, too, is in need of revision.

Finally, several scholars mistakenly imagine that David's dubious qualities require a negative evaluation of Yhwh as unjust. What kind of deity would "be with" such a murderous usurper? Some readers understandably prefer to question Yhwh's justice rather than conventional human notions of justice. These readers expect the Bible to teach what they know to be false, namely, that good and evil are rewarded or punished in this life. The "doctrine of retribution" is grounded in part in a selective and simplistic reading of the Deuteronomistic literature. A critical reading of the Books of Samuel suggests that Yhwh has purposes independent of ethics.

<sup>61</sup> For example, the French bishop and theologian Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704), who argued for political absolutism and the divine right of kings, also argues that David's example does not excuse rebellion. See Bossuet, *Politics drawn from the Very Words of Holy Scripture* (trans. Patrick Riley; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); originally published posthumously in 1709.

<sup>62</sup> Halpern's remarks are somewhat contradictory. Halpern refers to David as a "consummate revolutionary" and "the first modern man" because he challenges tradition. He thereby becomes a kind of biblical prototype of the modern critical biblical scholar. In this sense, Halpern sees David as a heroic figure. The bulk of his work, however, depicts a brutal tyrant whose challenge to tradition is criminal.