

Ideologies of power and place in the story of David

Robert Bascom, UBS, 2005 (unpublished)

Introduction

The presentation of David in the Hebrew Bible is a complex one. He is chosen by God, the ideal king; the principal model for the Messiah. He is the best of Israel's kings, and the flower of God's continuing election of Israel at the corporate and individual level.

Yet the text (esp. of Kings) does not hide David's faults. He is not presented like some of the patriarchs (e.g. Jacob), who seem to be foils (much like the bumbling disciples of the NT) for the text's message that God is in control no matter how much the patriarchs try to control their own destinies by lying about their wives, cheating their way into inheritance rights, etc. David is far too powerful in most of his dealings (the famous exceptions are his relations with Goliath and Saul) to be seen as merely a pawn in a larger game. While the biblical text focuses mainly on the ideal aspects of David's character, it nevertheless coldly documents his failings. In fact, while he is presented as brave and even generous, we also see him acting consistently in a manner which can only be described from a human perspective as ambitious, self-serving, politically shrewd, and ruthlessly violent.

In secondary presentations within the Christian tradition (e.g. the UBS comic series "David the Daring" and "David the Great"), David's character is inevitably developed further, and his human failings are usually downplayed or ignored (cf. this tendency already in the biblical text of Chronicles). Thus he is seen more as straightforward hero of the faith and less like the complex character of the Bible. Some examples of the darker side of David are in order:



David's political ambitions and violent nature are displayed early on in his career when he approaches Nabal through his servants for an invitation to Nabal's harvest feast in return for not having harmed him or his servants nor having robbed them (1Sa 25). In modern times, this is known as a protection racket, or extortion. What is more, after Nabal refuses to go along, David sets out to kill him and all his male descendants, and would have done so had not until Abigail intervened. Even in terms of Nabal's having violated ancient near eastern hospitality customs, David's reaction is more than a little harsh. Finally, David does not seem to wait for Nabal's body to cool before taking Abigail as his wife. Stripped of its overlay of "God-is-going-to-make-David-king-one-day" messianic ideology, the whole story makes David look pretty unseemly.

David's political shrewdness is particularly clear in his dealings with Saul's daughter Michal, David's first wife (1Sa 14 - 2Sa 21). After Michal helps David escape from Saul, Saul gives her to Palti(el), son of Laish as his wife. Later, David

demands her back in what looks like a blatant political maneuver to increase his royal legitimacy by association with Saul's lineage. Paltiel apparently truly loves Michal, as he follows her weeping as far as Abner, who is returning Michal to David (in another test of loyalty to David), will let him go (2Sa 3). Later (2Sa 6), Michal criticizes David for dancing in an indecorous manner before the Ark of the Covenant as it is being brought back to Jerusalem. In return, David apparently has nothing more to do with her sexually, depriving her of any possible heir to the throne (compare Ahashuerus' rejection of Vashti over disrespect in the book of Esther).

David's self-serving character is also revealed when he fasts and pleads with God for the life of the child Bathsheba had as a result of David's affair with her (2Sa 12). As soon as the child dies and David becomes aware of it, he stops his fasting and weeping. When the servants ask him about this, he replies: "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me, and the child may live.'"²³ But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? This response is certainly a practical one. But it also appears calculating and cold-hearted.

The height of David's ruthlessness and violence is revealed in his famous encounter with Bathsheba and his subsequent ordering of the murder of Uriah the Hittite (2Sa 11). That David tries to cover his actions by getting Uriah to go sleep with Bathsheba, and even gets him drunk in the attempt is bad enough, but then to order him to be killed and to send this order to Joab by Uriah's own hand is the height of cowardly and violent abuse of power. Of course David suffers consequences as a result of this abuse, yet he still seems to continue in his self-serving ways.

David's self-preservationist political tendencies are shown in a particularly personal way in the case of the death of his son Absalom (2Sa 19). David's love for Absalom cannot be questioned. His cry at the end of 2Sa 18 that he wishes he had died in Absalom's place finds an echo in every parent's heart who has watched a child suffer and wished to the depths of their being that they could take their child's place. Yet even here David is convinced by the short but effective political speech by Joab--the very man who had killed his son against direct and explicit orders (from David himself!).

Ironically, David later complains (1Ki 2) that Joab has been violent and makes Solomon promise to find a way to execute him, though David does not mention Absalom, but only Abner and Amasa, as Joab's victims. At the same time David also asks Solomon to kill Shimei as revenge for the latter having cursed David, even though he had publicly pardoned Shimei when he asked David's forgiveness.

One may object that David is also portrayed many times as generous and forgiving of his enemies, but one can see a self-serving motive in this behavior as well: these are cases where he would like to have these (usually former) enemies as allies, and the best way to accomplish this is by unexpected good treatment of beaten individuals (Saul, Abner, Shimei, Mephibosheth).

David seems to take all of these actions as an individual: a great, but fallible individual. As such we (and perhaps the text as well) sometimes make a distinction between the private person and the ideal king. But David was no monarch of the Middle Ages, clinging to power by means of a delicate political balance between competing lords and defending his position by an already bankrupt ideology of the divine right of kings. David was an ancient near eastern despot. He was the state. So his ambition and his violence must be seen both in their personal and institutional dimensions.

Social Science, Theology, and Institutional Ideology

Mary Douglas makes it clear that individuals take much of their personal identities from the groups to which they belong. These groups, or institutions, give these individuals a way to see themselves, and in many cases, a way to think and believe:

"Durkheim and Fleck taught that each kind of community is a thought world, expressed in its own thought style, penetrating the minds of its members, defining their experience, and settling the poles of their moral understanding... For better or worse, individuals really do share their thoughts and they do to some extent harmonize their preferences, and they have no other way to make the big decisions except within the scope of institutions they build." (p. 128)

These institutions include the state. Reinhold Niebuhr stated clearly in the context of the time between the two world wars of the last century that the morality of the state can never reach the level of that of the individual. This is because the state operates under the disadvantage that it is responsible for those under its administration. In order to fulfill this responsibility, it must preserve itself first at all costs. It is this self-preservationist instinct which drives the state to police its own people, to make war, to punish and to kill. Not all theologians agree that states should in fact carry out these actions, and many Christians disagree with certain of the specific applications that states in fact make of their power, but most see this institutional exercise of power as a necessary evil. Niebuhr is among them:

“The necessity of using force in the establishment of unity in a national community, and the inevitable selfish exploitation of the instruments of coercion by the groups who wield them, adds to the selfishness of nations.” (p. 89)

Paul Tillich also has commented on the power exercised by groups. He saw the problem as well as the promise: “Structures of power are always centered in inorganic beings like crystals, molecules, atoms, as well as in organic beings. In the latter ones the centeredness increases and reaches in man the state of self-consciousness. Then a new centered structure appears; the social group, or, as it is called if it has a manifest centre, a social organism... the centre of a social group is those who represent it, the rulers or the parliaments, or those who have the real power behind the scene... social power is hierarchical power... the ruling minority not only expresses the power and justice of being of the group, is also expresses the communal spirit if the group, its ideals and valuation.” (pp. 91-98)

David backed up his newly-founded royal institutions with ideologies of permanence and power. Mary Douglas would no doubt claim that these institutional ideologies formed him as much as he furthered them. They were eventually crafted to establish David personally as the founder of a royal dynasty (the house of David-2Sa 7), as well as to carve out a place for the establishment of the permanent structures to support such a dynasty (Jerusalem as the spiritual and political center of the people of Israel). David’s ideologies of dynastic power and permanent place arguably led him astray morally at times (see above). But his sense of personal election may also have given him a heightened recognition of personal responsibility, and the permanence of God’s dwelling in Jerusalem enabled the founding of a critical prophetic tradition which often challenged the “establishment” monarchical power. These royal institutions and ideologies also brought David to repent of at least some of his actions. It is worth looking into the background of these traditions and their complex character.

Yahweh: God of the Fathers or God of Zion?

One thread of the royal theology from the time of David comes out of what some have seen as a “nomadic ideal” in ancient Israel, a concept further developed by Albrecht Alt. His thesis is that the god(s) of the fathers were at first personal (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) rather than tied to local (Bethel, Gilgal, Shechem, et. al) cult centers as were the Canaanite 𐤇𐤍𐤔𐤏 . Even Yahweh was site-connected originally (Seir, Edom, Sinai, later Shiloh, Jerusalem), and the god(s) of the fathers also became connected with the local cult centers in a compromise to Canaanite 𐤇𐤍𐤔𐤏 after the Israelite tribes entered the land. Later, when the already assimilated (in terms of cult centers) god(s) of the fathers worshipped by individual tribes were replaced by the national God Yahweh, an interesting thing happened. Instead of the worship of Yahweh assimilating to one of his early (Seir, Edom, Sinai) or late (Shiloh, Jerusalem) cult centers completely, the personal and non-local quality of the original numina of the patriarchs came to be a fundamental characteristic of Yahweh.¹

Others have echoed Alt’s characterization of the tribal period and its theological significance. Samuel Terrien notes, for example, that

“...from the start of the Yahwist’s epic (Gen 12.1ff.), the memories of patriarchal travels point to a single motivation: The peculiar summons of a ‘nomadic’ Deity that appears at first to have been completely independent of a localized shrine or priesthood.”²

¹ “...the essential character of these gods [was] as the guide and guardian of their group of worshippers.” Alt, “God”, p. 65 Yahweh is presented in the Hebrew Bible not only as an itinerant (tutelary) and local (sanctuary) deity, but also as a high god (cf. 1Ch 29.10-19).

² Terrien, *The Elusive Presence*, p. 67.

Claus Westermann also has at least partially confirmed Alt's earlier conclusions when he finds the only the promises going back to the patriarchal period itself were

"...the promise of a son, the promise of God's aid and presence during a journey, and the promise of new territory (suggested in 12:1-3). The other promises function to link the patriarchal period with the history of the nation, and came in to being after the settlement."³

Subsequent to Alt's suggestions on the matter, a nearly complete reversal took place within OT scholarship on the existence of a nomadic ideal in Israel's landed history. Most commentators began to downplay the significance of any so-called idealization of nomadism in Israel's theology. This reversal came as a much needed corrective to earlier idealistic assumptions of a pure desert faith diametrically opposed to a decadent Canaanite fertility cult. To be sure, the goal of the major itinerary in the Hebrew Bible was settled existence in the land of Canaan.

Yet during the rise of the monarchy and the eventual losing of the land certain indications remain of a live nomadic versus agriculturalist debate in Israel. This was an argument of routedness versus rootedness, if you will. Yahweh is both the guiding, elusive God who give Israel a route, and the established sanctuary God who causes her to take root. God led her to the promised land, but Israel was not to stop following once she reached it.

Here the realistic and spiritualized itinerary concepts interact. The presentation of Israel as physically being "on the way" reinforces a sense of spiritual and moral direction as well. They are a people with direction, not lost, aimless, or immobile. The other side of this mirror for identity shows the people of Israel that when they reach the land of promise, they are in danger of losing their way.⁴

The story of Cain and Abel and the mode of existence of the Rechabites, among other things, give us reason to believe that tensions continued to exist between land-tied and land-free groups in Israel. The debate probably centered in the rise of the monarchy and the religious changes this new institution brought about. Frank Moore Cross sees Solomon's actions of banishing Abiathar, building the Temple, and forming administrative districts as a true break with the egalitarian tradition of Yahwism up to that point. "Covenantal forms in their conditionality gave way to eternal forms in the royal cult." Walter Brueggemann argues further that Israel's experience of slavery in Egypt as well as her own virtual enslavement in the land of Canaan under Solomon created a certain anxiety: "Israel was left to wonder if land always led to slavery."⁵

When the monarchy instituted political changes, there was bound to be religious justification for it as well as religious opposition of the most political kind. Whatever disagreements scholars may have over nomadism in Israel, most agree that there was religious opposition to the building of the Temple, and that this opposition took the form of an appeal to the amphictyonic tent tradition.⁶ The key text in this regard is the beginning of Nathan's oracle in 2Sa 7. Yahweh insists on his freedom to move about in a tent (7.6), and couples it with two dramatic reversals: he will appoint a place for Israel to dwell securely (7.10) and will establish the Davidic dynasty (7.11). It is the people and the king who need the security of place, while Yahweh defends his own freedom of movement.

A less famous but perhaps even more damaging rebuke of monarchical temple-building aspirations is contained within a short speech in the mouth of Uriah the Hittite. When David is trying to get Uriah to go home and sleep with his wife in order that David's adultery might not be discovered, Uriah says (emphasis mine)"

"The ark and Israel and Judah dwell in booths, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go down to my house, to eat and drink and to lie with my wife?" (2Sa 11.11)

³ Westermann, *The Promises to the Fathers*, p. 161.

⁴ The "wandering Aramean" and sojourner language of the Hebrew Bible should also be subsumed under the conceptual framework of the itinerary, and should not be seen as aimless or random movement.

⁵ Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, p. 239; Brueggemann, *The Land*, p. 10.

⁶ R. E. Clements, *God and Temple*, pp. 55-60; von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch*, pp. 119-123.

Uriah's own hesitation may be explained by the prohibition of sexual relations in time of war (cf. 1Sa 21.5-6). But the mention of the itinerant ark, Israel and Judah in the mouth of a נָא cannot be interpreted as anything less than a rebuke of David's own policies of accommodation to Canaanite cult center theology following his capture of Jebus.

On the whole, the changes brought by the monarchy in Israel must have been disturbing to many defenders of orthodox Yahwism. Cross sees an ancient antipathy between "...the typology of the tent of 'El (and Yahweh) and the royal temple of Baal and their foundation in patriarchal and monarchical social structures respectively." Thus as "patriarchal" cattle breeding was replaced by monarchical agriculture (e.g. in Syria and Transjordan) the cult of 'El the guide declined, while the cult of Baal the rain-giver increased. Yet for the people of Yahweh, "the extraordinary vigor of the tradition of the tent as the ideal shrine of Israel may be seen in its survival in the Priestly Tabernacle."⁷

The older patriarchal tent tradition was eventually to lose to the newer royal temple theology. If this tent tradition was connected with the north, then the divided kingdom and the fall of the north may have hastened the victory of this southern royal theology.⁸ It is interesting in this respect to see how the itinerary form combines both the aspects of movement and specific location. Because it had both aspects, the itinerary form may have been able to function as a bridge between the either-or of way and place in Israel's theology.

An indication of the way in which this may have taken place is found in a presumed pre-canonical form of the ark narrative. The ark has an extended itinerary beginning at Shiloh, followed next by an exile among the Philistines and then by an extended stay at Kiriath-jerarim. Finally, and after yet another stop, it comes to Jerusalem. Thus the royal theology of place is reinforced by the use of the goal-oriented nature of the itinerary genre. If God is on the march, his journey surely ends in Jerusalem.⁹

Conclusion

So what of David? Was he a hero or a villain? Was he the founder and keeper of the highest and best traditions of Israel or a selfish and violent ancient near eastern despot, cynically manipulating events for his own benefit? The biblical text documents both perspectives, and reveals the ideologies implied by them. David was a complex individual, interacting with the institutions of his day as well as their supporting ideologies. There is a theological benefit to seeing all sides of the man as well as the attendant and corresponding institutional ideologies. The God of the Bible does not restrict his work to perfect individuals and institutions. They are nowhere to be found.

While the standard UBS comic series tends to present the more positive side of the people of the Bible, the more recent ABS graphic novel "Samson", directed at young adult males, captures some of the darker side of that biblical character, or perhaps more accurately, tells the story of a character whose story is darker than most in the biblical text to begin with.¹⁰ As the Bible Societies look for new audiences, hopefully our translated products can be as broad and rich as the texts from which they come.

But a more important issue is also raised by the above examination of the David story. Communities of faith cannot hope to adequately address problems of violence within or without until we face up to them in the biblical text itself. It is not simply the motivation to reach special audiences that should drive the Bible Societies to produce newer products dealing with the dark side of David (and other biblical "heroes" as well). We need to understand what it was about David that we need to avoid as well as what we want to emulate. Otherwise willful ignorance of the individual and institutional violence in the biblical text may well be mirrored by willful ignorance of the same kind of violence in our world, in our communities, and in our homes.

⁷ Cross, *Myth*, pp. 48, 231, 72-73.

⁸ Cf. A. F. Campbell, *The Ark Narrative*, pp. 173ff. and Terrien, *Presence*, pp. 170-171.

⁹ Campbell, *Narrative*, esp. pp. 201-210.

¹⁰ It may not be accidental that the major Israelite political institution of Samson's day – the Judges (*ad hoc* military commanders) of Israel, existed in a semi-chaotic social context.

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