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Author(s): J. M. P. Smith

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THE CHARACTER OF KING DAVID¹

†J. M. P. SMITH

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

THE character of David as presented in the Old Testament is rather hard to determine. He has been so greatly magnified by the Chronicler and by the Psalter that it is difficult to believe all that they say about David. If it were all true, we should have to deal with a most complex and contradictory personality. The oldest and most reliable story about David is found in I Sam. 16 1 to 31 13, which continues through the whole of II Samuel, and concludes in I Kings 1 1–2 11. Even this narrative was not contemporaneous with David, but originated a century or two after his day. Therefore it probably praises him unduly, and must be discounted quite a little. But this paper will accept practically most of its statements at their face value.

We first encounter David as a lad in his father's home at Bethlehem, where Samuel anointed him king over Israel (I Sam. 16 1–13).² A little later on he is called in to relieve Saul's insanity by playing the lyre and is appointed Saul's armour-bearer (I Sam. 16 14–23).³ His next appearance is in Saul's camp when Israel is fighting the Philistines. On this occasion occurs the incident of the

¹ Prepared as a Presidential Address by Professor Smith before his death, this communication was read to the Society from the manuscript by Professor W. C. Graham.

² The narrative is a part of a late element in Samuel originating not earlier than the middle of the 7th century B.C.; Wellhausen, Kuenen, Löhr, Kennedy; contra Batten.

³ This narrative is part of one of the earlier sources of Samuel; so Budde, Kennedy, and Batten.

famous fight with Goliath who is slain by a stone from David's sling. This is certainly a deed combining both courage and skill. But the record is subject to considerable doubt. David was only a youth at this time, with no experience in the art of war. Hence his volunteering to meet the giant in battle would have been an act of unparalleled daring. In view of this marked tendency to glorify David in all the records it is quite possible, if not probable, that this record is a product of the same tendency and is not based upon historical fact. This point of view is rendered even more plausible by the fact that in II Sam. 21 19, Goliath is said to have been slain by "Elhanan, the son of Jair,⁴ the Bethlehemite." Most scholars accept this later statement and regard the name Goliath as a later addition to the David-story of the slaying of the giant. Even if David did not slay Goliath, he probably did slay some unnamed giant and thus laid the foundation of his reputation for heroic courage.⁵

The next story regarding David reports the beginning of his intimate friendship with Jonathan, Saul's son (I Sam. 18 1-5). This is followed by the record of the praise sung by groups of women as David returned from campaigns against Israel's enemies:

"Saul has slain his thousands,
But David his tens of thousands." (I Sam. 18 6-9)

This sort of thing aroused the jealousy of Saul who thereupon made various attempts to take David's life. One of these schemes was to make David the king's son-in-law on condition that he should first slay a hundred Philistines. This David accomplished and thus made Saul more hostile to him than ever (I Sam. 18 20-28). Jonathan's friendship now stood David in good stead, and served to save his life two or three times over. On one of these occasions David conspires with Jonathan in telling Saul a lie (I Sam. 20 29). Lying was one of David's foremost devices in getting himself out of difficulties.

David straightway flees from Saul and on his way to Gath in Philistia he stops at Nob with Ahimelech, priest of the sanctuary

⁴ The Hebrew text says "*Jaare oregim*," but the "*oregim*" is probably an error, having crept in from the line below.

⁵ So Kennedy, Batten, *et al.*

there. Now he tells another lie to Ahimelech, through which false pretenses he obtains food and weapons from Ahimelech (I Sam. 21 1-9). This help given by Ahimelech to David was reported by Doeg, the Edomite, to Saul who thereupon ordered the slaughter of all the priests at Nob, a total of 85 men, and all of the citizens of the town. When this was told to David he said, "I knew that day, because Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul. I myself am guilty of all the lives of your father's house." And yet he lied to Ahimelech notwithstanding; and so deceived him into helping him at the cost of his life.

Having arrived at Gath, he discovers that Achish, its king, is hostile to him and intends to kill him. Thereupon David enacts another lie. He plays the part of a madman and so saves his life (I Sam. 10-13).⁶ Evidently in those days insanity was looked upon as due to possession by an evil spirit; and it was regarded as dangerous for anyone to lay hands upon an insane person lest thereupon the evil spirit might leave the madman and take possession of his assailant. Hence David was enabled to escape from Gath, and fled to the cave of Adullam. Saul chases him from place to place, till one night Saul and his men sleep in the cave that is already occupied by David and his men, but Saul is not aware of David's presence. During the night David secretly cuts off a piece of Saul's robe, and in the morning waves it before Saul's eyes as he is departing and through it comes to an agreement with Saul, ratified by an oath, that he will not destroy Saul's descendants (I Sam. 24 1-24). This episode reveals another phase of David's character. He had Saul at his mercy; Saul was constantly trying to kill him; why did he not slay Saul when he had the chance and so rid himself of trouble and danger? There are two answers to this question. First, Saul was his father-in-law and the father of his dear friend Jonathan hence he shrinks from killing him. Secondly, Saul was Yahweh's Anointed; therefore he dare not lay hands upon him, he is even conscience-smitten because he has ventured to cut off the skirt of Saul's mantle (I Sam. 24 5).⁷

⁶ This is clearly a later addition; note that David is called in v. 11 "the King of the land."

⁷ Budde regards the oath sworn by David, that he will not harm Saul's descendants, as a later redactor's note.

The next episode recorded in David's life is the story of the raid upon Nabal (I Sam. 25 1-43). David hears that Nabal is shearing his sheep and giving a feast to his shepherds. He therefore sends messengers to Nabal reminding him that neither sheep nor shepherds have suffered at his hands and pleading for some gift in recognition of David's kindly protection. Nabal, however, resents their petition and sends them away empty-handed. David thereupon arms his 400 men and sets out to raid the home of Nabal. But Abigail, the wife of Nabal, went out to meet David and his men, taking with her "two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five dressed sheep, five measures of parched grain, a hundred bunches of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs." When she met David she descended from her ass and fell with her face to the ground before David, presenting to him all the gifts she had brought and apologising for Nabal's curt refusal to send anything to David. David accepts her gifts and her apology and shows her favour, though he had set out with the intention of slaying every male in Nabal's establishment. Nabal was holding a drinking bout at this time. The next morning Abigail told him what had taken place and the effect upon Nabal was paralyzing. About ten days later he died; whereupon David married his widow (I Sam. 25 1-44).⁸ David was already married to Michal, Saul's daughter, but two wives were not enough for him. He also married about this same time Ahinoam of Jezreel. That gives him three wives—a fair start toward his final goal.

In I Sam. 26 1-25⁹ we have another story of Saul's pursuit of David, and of David having Saul in his power, but refusing to kill him. David and Abishai steal into Saul's camp by night and come upon Saul fast asleep. Abishai proposes to kill Saul on the spot, but David forbids it, saying, "Destroy him not; for who can lay his hand upon Yahweh's Anointed and be innocent?" They therefore retire taking with them the spear and the jug of water which were standing at Saul's head. Removing to a safe distance David then calls and wakes up Saul and his army. He then addresses Saul in terms which reveal the primitive character of his idea of

⁸ This is a section of the oldest source in the Books of Samuel.

⁹ This is part of one of the older sources in the Books of Samuel; so Budde.

God. Those terms are: "If Yahweh has stirred you up against me, let him be appeased by an offering; but if they be the sons of men, cursed be they before Yahweh, for they have driven me out today, so that I have no share in the inheritance of Yahweh, saying 'Go serve other gods.' Now therefore, may my blood not fall to the earth far removed from the presence of Yahweh." These words were spoken just as David had determined to cross over into Philistia, and they show that David's conception of Yahweh was purely national, for he evidently thought that he would be beyond the range of Yahweh's influence and power when he was in Philistine territory. David's idea of God was not only spatially limited, but also morally. He conceives the idea that Yahweh may have incited Saul against him, in which case it would be possible to buy Yahweh off, placating him by a sacrifice.

The next year and four months David spends with Achish, King of Gath, according to I Sam. 27.¹⁰ During this period he made attacks upon the Geshurites, the Girzites, and the Amalekites. Whenever he attacked these regions he would not leave alive either man or woman. These regions were evidently friendly toward the King of Gath. Hence when Achish asked David where he had been raiding, David would reply, "Against the Negeb of Judah, or against the Negeb of the Jerahmeelites, or against the Negeb of the Kenites." These answers were out and out lies, told to deceive Achish and to make him think that David was making himself abhorrent to the people of Israel and could be depended upon to fight for the Philistines. When war broke out between Philistia and Israel, Achish invited David and his 600 men to join him in the fight against Israel. David accepted the proposal, but the rest of the Philistine princes protested against David's participation in the war, so that Achish had to send him back to Ziklag, his home. When he returned there he discovered that in his absence the Amalekites had raided Ziklag and carried off all the women and children and much spoil. David and his men thereupon set out in pursuit of the Amalekites, overtook them, and slaughtered them, recovering his two wives, all the women and children, and all the spoil that had been taken from Ziklag

¹⁰ This is also one of the oldest sections in the Books of Samuel; so Budde.

and from Judah. On the way to the battle with the Amalekites, two hundred men of David's company had to be left behind at the Brook Besor, because they were too weary and worn to go further. So they were left in charge of the baggage. When the remaining 400 returned from the fray, a dispute arose as to the division of the spoil. The men who took part in the fight insisted upon keeping all the spoil for themselves, but David laid down the principle that:

As is the share of him who goes down into the battle,
Even so is his portion who remains with the baggage.
They shall share and share alike.

This became a permanent principle in Hebrew law.¹¹

After the death of Saul, David returned to Judah and took up his residence in Hebron. Thither the men of Judah came and anointed David king over Judah. He resided in Hebron as king of Judah for seven years and a half. While he was in Hebron he added four more wives to his harem, and six children were born to him. He also took particular pains to advertise to all Israel by his conduct that he was not responsible for the death of Abner who was slain by Joab, nor for that of Ishbaal, king of Israel, who was slain by Rechab and his brother Baanah. The result was that after the death of Ishbaal, the elders of Israel came to David at Hebron and there anointed him king of Israel, which position he held until his death, 33 years later. David thereupon went up to Jerusalem and seized the citadel of Zion, where he established his residence. Upon settling in Jerusalem, David took still more wives and at least ten (II Sam. 15 16) concubines; and eleven more children were born to him.

Soon after David became king of Israel, war broke out between Philistia and Israel. David won two victories over the Philistines. Thereupon, David went with 30,000 Israelites to bring up the ark of God to Jerusalem from Baal-Judah, where it had lodged since its return by the Philistines. On the way up occurred the death of Uzzah who had ventured to lay hold of the ark in order to steady it upon the rough road, and had fallen dead the moment he touched it. This disaster made David very angry at Yahweh

¹¹ Chapter 30 is part of the oldest document in the Books of Samuel; so Budde.

upon whom he laid the responsibility for Uzzah's death. He therefore turned the ark aside and deposited it in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite, where it stayed for three months. David, hearing that Obed-Edom and his household were being greatly blessed by Yahweh, went down to Obed-Edom's house and completed the journey of the ark up to Jerusalem. But when his wife Michal, Saul's daughter, saw him whirling and dancing before the ark as it went on its way, she despised David in her heart. When he returned to his home, she met him with this sarcastic remark: "How dignified was the king of Israel today as he stripped himself in sight of the maidservants of his retainers, as a common rake exposes himself." This remark cost Michal much, as first wife of David. "She had no child to the day of her death." This reveals how little David really cared for her. He had insisted when he became king of Israel that his wife Michal should be restored to him. This demand, however, was clearly based upon the fact that she was Saul's daughter and would therefore make his position as king more secure.

David's power spread rapidly and widely. He subdued the Philistines and the Moabites; two-thirds of the latter's males he put to death, leaving only one-third of them alive.¹² He also smote the king of Zobah, a Syrian district, and made the kingdom of Damascus tributary to Israel. He is also credited with having subdued and made tributary to him the Edomites, Ammonites, Moabites and Amalekites.

¹² This is a very uncertain passage. The M T reads, "Then he smote Moab and measured them by line, making them lie down upon the ground, and he measured two lines to put to death and a full line to keep alive." The LXX reads: "And he measured them by lines, making them lie down upon the earth, and it was the two lines to put to death and the two lines to be kept alive." The Syriac renders as follows: "And he smote the Moabite; and he measured them with a line; and he made them lie upon the ground; and he measured them with two lines to kill; and with a full line to keep alive." The Vulgate reads: "Percussit Moab; et mensus est eos funiculo coaequans terrae. Mensus est autem duos funiculos, unum ad occidentum, unum ad vivificandum." Since both Hebrew and Syriac as well as Greek have the number two in the first clause of the latter part of the verse, it is much more likely that they as the oldest records are right in this respect than that the Vulgate should be with its "*unum*."

Then comes the story of David's adultery with Bathsheba, wife of Uriah, the Hittite, a crime so glaring that the Chronicler fails to mention it.¹³ David learning from Bathsheba that she is with child by him, tries to cover up his sin by sending for Uriah, her husband, who is absent, engaged in war against the Ammonites. Uriah returns, but refuses to sleep at his home. David therefore sends him back to the army and sends with him an order to Joab to place Uriah "in the forefront of the hottest fighting and then draw back from him that he may be stricken and die." What he desired was accomplished. Then after Bathsheba's period of mourning was completed, he took her as his wife and she bore him a son. This shows that David was a grossly sensual man. He already had a superfluity of wives and concubines, and yet was not satisfied but must seize another man's wife and kill her husband. Is this the kind of man to have written the Book of Psalms?

In connection with the capture of Rabbah of the Ammonites we are told that David "brought forth all the people that were in it, and set them to the saws and to cutting instruments of iron and to axes of iron, and on occasion he made them labor at the brick-moulds. Even thus he did in turn to all the cities of the Ammonites." (II Sam. 12 26-31.) Whether this means that he tortured the Ammonites or simply that he put them to forced labor is an open question. But whichever was the case, the treatment was cruel enough.

It is not surprising that with such a father there arose troubles in David's family (II Sam. 13 1-14 43). The rape of Tamar by her own halfbrother Amnon was the beginning of trouble. David did not even reprove Amnon, "for he loved him, because he was his first-born." But Absalom, being full brother of Tamar, took matters in his own hands, and arranged a banquet, with David's approval, at which he had Amnon murdered. Absalom at once fled to the court of the king of Geshur where he remained three years. He was then permitted by David to return home, but he did not see his father personally for still two years, when through the mediation of Joab a reconciliation was brought about. Four years later, however, Absalom organized a revolt against his father,

¹³ This too (II Sam. 11 12-25) is one of the oldest stories in the Books of Samuel; so Budde.

which resulted in a battle between the forces of David and those of Absalom. In this battle Absalom met his death at the hands of Joab.

The death of Absalom was a great blow to David and only through the challenge of Joab did he rally sufficiently to gather the people at large around him once more. In connection with Absalom's revolt, Meribaal, the son of Jonathan, got into trouble. Ziba, the manager of his estate, made a false report to David regarding Meribaal's attitude, charging him with treason against David. On the basis of the report, David authorized Ziba to take over the entire estate for himself. Later on Meribaal sees David and explains the real situation, with the result that David now divides the estate between Ziba and Meribaal. This was not exactly a right thing to do. But when the severe famine came upon Israel and was explained as punishment for Saul's slaughter of the Gibeonites, David makes atonement by the hanging of two sons of Saul and five grandsons, sparing Meribaal because of the oath that he had sworn with Jonathan to the effect that he would care for his descendants. He, however, disregards the oath that he had sworn to Saul in I Sam. 24 21f. It is, however, an open question as to whether that oath was actually sworn.

One bright spot in David's career is recorded in II Sam. 23 15-17.¹⁴ In a war with the Philistines who were in possession of Bethlehem, David longed "for a drink of water from the well at Bethlehem, which is by the gate." Those of his heroic followers hearing this wish broke through the camp of the Philistines, drew water from the well, and brought it to David. He would not drink it, but poured it out to Yahweh, saying, "Far be it from me, O Yahweh, that I should do this! It is the blood of men who went at the peril of their lives." At first sight it would naturally appear to the men who had risked their lives to get the water that this act of David's rendered futile their brave venture; but when they heard the terms used by David in evaluating their deed, they realized that he regarded it as a deed of the highest value and beyond all praise. That David was fundamentally a religious man

¹⁴ This narrative is generally recognized as belonging to later additions to the Books of Samuel; so Benzinger, Kennedy. But Budde and Kautzsch-Bertholet regard it as relatively early material.

appears from this episode and from the frequent references to occasions when he consulted the ephod in order to obtain an expression of Yahweh's will. It is also shown by the story of the bringing up of the ark to Jerusalem, by the account of his preparations for building the temple, by the readiness with which he accepted the rebukes of the prophets on more than one occasion, and by his purchase of the threshing floor of Araunah, the Jebusite, for the purpose of building an altar there upon which to make sacrifices to Yahweh that the plague might be stayed. But while he was intensely religious, it must be borne in mind that his religion was extremely primitive and naive, like that of his generation as a whole.

The character of David is reflected clearly in the last words of the king (I Kings 2 4-9). These words are regarded as a later addition by Benzinger in his *Kurzer Handcommentar* on the Books of Kings.¹⁵ But his reason for making them late seems to me to be wholly mistaken. He says that an entirely different judgment of David appears here from that given in the Books of Samuel. We have been dealing thus far with the record of David's life found in I and II Samuel. This record certainly does not make David a saint. It rather makes him at times a brute. Further, the course of history in later times was along the line of an increasing glorification of David. Therefore it is much easier to account for these last vows of David as coming from the hand of some one who knew him well than as having originated in later times when David was increasingly idealized. There is pretty general agreement that vv. 2-4 are from a later hand. But there is good reason to accept vv. 5-9 as being relatively early. In vv. 5 and 6 David tells Solomon to see to it that Joab gets his deserts for the murder of Abner and Amasa. These murders were for the benefit of David himself, and the killing of Abner was an act of self-defence on Joab's part. David therefore had no warrant for imposing such an act of revenge upon Solomon so far as the death of Abner was concerned. Furthermore, Joab had been a staunch supporter of David and had been his leading general in many campaigns. Why did not David himself punish Joab and Amasa if it was necessary that they should be

¹⁵ So also Wellhausen, Stade, Gressmann, Kautzsch-Bertholet.

punished instead of loading this responsibility upon young Solomon? The Septuagint here has one changed reading which may be correct. In v. 6 it reads "innocent blood upon *my* girdle that was about *my* loins and upon *my* sandals that wore upon *my* feet." That brings the guilt of Joab's actions home to David himself, and when not expiated by David it would pass on to his son. Solicitude for Solomon's welfare therefore may have been one of the elements entering into David's behest. In vv. 8 and 9 David bids Solomon "bring down the old age of Shimei with blood to Sheol." Shimei had cursed David severely when David was fleeing from Absalom, but David had met him again on his way back to Jerusalem and had taken oath with Shimei not to kill him. Now he plans for revenge upon Shimei through the hands of Solomon. He kept his oath as long as he lived, but he also remembered the offence of Shimei and took care to transfer the accomplishment of his revenge to his heir who was not limited by any oath. David was evidently restrained from taking vengeance upon Joab by fear. Joab was so outstanding a figure and held so high a place in the estimate of his contemporaries that David did not dare to lay hands upon him. In the case of Shimei he was bound by oath. Hence he cherished the desire for vengeance but had to hand on the performance of it to his son Solomon.

David was a brave and aggressive ruler. He combined Judah and Israel under his sway and he made the surrounding peoples largely tributary to Israel. But the spread of Israel's power was almost wholly due to his military power and cruelty. He was loyal to his friends, but ruthless to his foes. He was a liar, deceiver, and traitor. That later tradition should have glorified and magnified him so much notwithstanding his many limitations passes all understanding. These later writers deliberately ignored most of his crimes and faults and focussed attention upon his virtues. From that point of view he is presented as a great figure. But his place in the minds of modern men who take into account all the known facts is relatively small.