CHAPTER 4

King David, Serial Killer

A. The Portrayal of David and the Date of 2 Samuel

To reconstruct David, one has mainly to understand the books of Samuel and especially the intentions that shaped them. Samuel was later incorporated into the Israelite canon, then into Judaism and Christianity. Given David's status in those traditions, this history indicates that Samuel for the most part represents an apology on David's behalf. But the perspective it adopts is not uncritical — in fact, it condemns David as an adulterer and murderer late in his career. What issues, precisely, occupy the book's attention? In other words, what were the concerns about David that Samuel was formulated to address?

The same question has broader implications, both for the dating of the text and for the existence and nature of the early Israelite monarchy. This holds in part because Samuel is extraordinary in providing a narrative about the formation of the state. State literatures in the Near East tend to promote the view that kingship was, in the words of one Mesopotamian text, "lowered from heaven." Kingship always was.

But one question before us is the very historicity of the United Monarchy. In recent years, numerous books have directly or indirectly questioned the existence of David and Solomon.[1] These works have been written from literary, ar-

1. John Van Seters, *In Search of History* (1983; repr. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997); *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992); Thomas L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People: From the Written and Archaeological Sources.* SHANE 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1992); Philip R. Davies, *In Search of*

chaeological, anthropological, and philosophical perspectives. What many of them share is a "minimalist" approach that denies the presence of an Israelite state until Assyrian inscriptions, starting in the year 853, attest a kingship of Ahab, and shortly after attest that his father, Omri, founded the dynasty and that Jehu overthrew it.

The historicity of the United Monarchy has been the hot historical topic in Biblical Studies for almost a decade. Scholars reject the historicity of the patriarchs, despair of reconstructing an exodus from Egypt. They deny that the Israelites conquered Canaan *en masse*. They feel that the "period of the judges" is illuminated, if at all, only in fragments: no real history of the period can rely on the texts about it, as opposed to the archaeology. Now their skepticism — in the instance of the minimalists — has butted up against the United Monarchy. And yet, it is the United Monarchy, in some form, rather than Omri, that enjoys the earliest attestation of a figure in external sources.

We no longer need debate the existence of a David, now that the Tel Dan stela — and, according to some scholars, the Mesha stela[2] — shows that Judah's dynastic name was "the House of David" already in the 9th century. The revisionists do debate it. But to ask whether David was invented wholecloth not only ignores the early date of the material, and all the evidence that will be addressed below. It also, ultimately, is dull.[3] The real question among historians is whether David constructed an empire, which was then administered, and lost, by his son Solomon. While the archaeological evidence for a central state has been called into question more than once,[4] the easiest evidence to dismiss is that of the biblical text. Nor does a critical disposition toward the archaeology rule David's activity out of court — it merely limits the way in which one re-

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"Ancient Israel." JSOTSup 148 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992); James W. Flanagan, *David's Social Drama: A Hologram of Israel's Early Iron Age.* JSOTSup 73 (Sheffield: Almond, 1988); David W. Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools in Monarchic Judah: A Socio-Archeological Approach.* JSOTSup 109 (Sheffield: Almond, 1991). See for further bibliography and response, William G. Dever, "Archaeology, Urbanism, and the Rise of the Israelite State," in *Urbanism in Antiquity: From Mesopotamia to Crete,* ed. Walter E. Aufrecht, Neil A. Mirau, and Steven W. Gauley. JSOTSup 244 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1997), 172-93; "Archaeology and the 'Age of Solomon.'"

2. KAI 181:31, as read by Émile Puech, "La stèle araméenne de Dan: Bar Hadad II et la coalition des Omrides et de la maison de David," *RB* 101 (1994): 215-41, esp. 227; André Lemaire, "'House of David' Restored in Moabite Inscription," *BAR* 20/3 (1994): 30-37. The traces in the photograph fit Lemaire's reading, but the syntax seems peculiar at this stage. An alternative proposed by Nadav Na'aman is reviewed below, Chapter 23.

3. See Hans M. Barstad, "History and the Hebrew Bible," in *Can a "History of Israel" Be Written?* ed. Lester L. Grabbe. JSOTSup 245 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1997), 37-64.

4. Especially by Flanagan, *David's Social Drama.*

constructs it. So, a critical overture to the books of Samuel — an overture intended to explain their contents in detail, not merely to scoff at them — becomes crucial. What does such an approach imply about the early existence of the Israelite state?

The figure of David was as firmly imprinted on the identity of Judah's elite as the Tel Dan stela would suggest. Over and over the books of Kings hold him up as a standard for royal conduct and as the ancestral guarantor of divine favor for Judah's capital city. He becomes the author of many Psalms. In the books of Chronicles, in the postexilic era, probably in the 5th century B.C.E., he is ever *more* important. He plans and prepares for the building of the temple, down to the appointment of its officiants. David is Jerusalem's claim to sovereignty over all Israel, not just Judah. Yet the David of Samuel, and especially of 2 Samuel, is not the plaster saint of later memory and messianism. In 2 Samuel, as we have seen, David is a human being.

Scholarly literature on the date and purpose of Samuel has laid waste to forests. But the field today is split. Is 2 Samuel early, even roughly contemporary with the events it describes?[5] Or is it, as some critics claim, a late, fictional concoction?[6] What are the nature and purpose of Samuel — and thus its origin? And how does knowledge of Samuel's nature and purpose enable us to reconstruct David's career, not exactly as the text presents it, but against the background of the social and political situation that evoked the portrait? Philip R. Davies has written that it is a "ruse" to understand ancient persons or events in ways that vary from our reports about them, rather than deny their existence *tout court.*[7] In the field of history, this "ruse" is called "reconstruction."

A fertile approach to reconstructing David is that of P. Kyle McCarter.[8] What strikes a historian on reading the text of Samuel is that so many key actors die violently. Samuel spends a lot of time defending the principal architect of Israelite identity in Judah against what seem to be allegations raised against

5. This was the consensus from the early 19th century roughly until the 1970s. As noted, it was actions described in Samuel, especially, that enabled W. M. L. de Wette to ascertain that the theology of the Deuteronomic reform had not always been programmatic for Israelite cultic practice.

6. E.g., van Seters, *In Search of History,* 249-91; Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel";* Thompson. For a devastating response to van Seters's approach, see Richard E. Friedman, *The Hidden Book in the Bible,* 350-78, especially in regard to the antiquity of J.

7. Philip R. Davies, "Introduction," in *The Origins of the Ancient Israelite States,* ed. Volkmar Fritz and Davies. JSOTSup 228 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 15.

8. P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *II Samuel;* see also "The Apology of David," *JBL* 99 (1980): 489-504; cf. also especially James C. VanderKam, "Davidic Complicity in the Deaths of Abner and Eshbaal: A Historical and Redactional Study," *JBL* 99 (1980): 521-39.

him by contemporary opponents. Most of the clearest allegations concern murders. As McCarter observes, the author of the text thus evinces political concerns that had to be dead horses, even forgotten horses, within a generation of David's death. For this reason, one should give credence — not unqualified, but nevertheless credence — to many claims that Samuel makes.

In his treatment of David's apology, McCarter identifies the following killings, not as those for which David is responsible, but as those of which he was accused: Saul and Jonathan, who were dismembered by Philistines after the battle of Jezreel; Abner, who was stabbed under the armor by Joab and Abishai during an otherwise friendly consultation; Ishbaal, stabbed in the chest and decapitated by Gibeonites;[9] Uriah, killed in warfare by Ammonites, but on Joab's order; Amnon, David's eldest son, murdered by his third son, Absalom, by repeated stabbing during a festival; Absalom, stabbed time and again by Joab and his armor-bearers with thrusting sticks; and Amasa, also stabbed in the chest during a kiss of greeting, by Joab.

This is not all the fun in the book. In addition to these cases, Nabal, the husband of David's second wife, expires naturally, but suddenly, and at an extremely convenient time. Abner kills Asahel, Joab's brother, in battle, by thrusting the butt of his spear into his chest (2 Sam. 2:23). David is avowedly responsible for: hanging seven other Saulides; killing an Amaleqite who claims to have killed Saul and brings Saul's regalia in token thereof; killing and dismembering the Gibeonites who assassinated Ishbaal and brought David his head (2 Sam. 4:12). The people of Abel decapitate Sheba and hurl his head over the wall at Joab's insistence. Finally, Benaiah kills Adonijah (1 Kgs. 2:13-25), Joab (2:28-35), and Shimei (2:36-44) on Solomon's order. These are just the highlights. If all this is factitious, we have an author who rolled Hamlet and Richard III into one, the ancient equivalent of Thomas Harris, with the explicit intention of *concealing* the existence of Hannibal Lector. It is strong evidence that David is historical, but equally strong evidence that he was unsavory. So when "minimalists" compare his image to that of King Arthur, differences are immediately apparent: Arthurian legend does not convict him as a murderer, and does not spend most of its time apologizing for the fact that his enemies keep dying violently.

9. 2 Sam. 3:27, 30; 4:6-8.

B. Ten Little Indians

Case 1: Nabal

The apology that alibis David for these killings is ham-fisted. But can we reconstruct history from it? David's first providential death is that of Nabal (1 Sam. 25). Abigail has pleaded with David not to kill the man, when he conveniently drops dead of natural causes. This is how David acquires his second wife, who brings him a substantial estate in the hinterland of Judah, but plays no further role in the narrative. Did Abigail murder her husband to defect to David? One cannot help but think of the occasional topos of the murder suspect who comes to believe that the death of all who cross him or her is a divine judgment. This is the basis of the plot in one of Agatha Christie's novels.[10] A predictable psychological variation would be the beneficiary of violent or providential death who takes on the role of agent after a time. Is Abigail David's catalyst? The case is hard to call.

The literary position of the Abigail account, however, deserves attention. In the B source, it comes just before David refrains from killing Saul, when the latter is completely at his mercy (1 Sam. 26). Chastened by Abigail's confession of Nabal's wickedness, David next spares the life even of his own most lethal enemy. The sparing of Saul not only indicates David's innocence in that king's death, it deflects suspicion from David's contact with Nabal. At least the suspicion that contemporaries accused David of Nabal's murder is justified — and the narrative tells them that Nabal's last contact was not with David, whom he never met personally, but with Abigail. If the accusation was whispered among the tribesmen of southern Judah, the literary account would redirect it onto Abigail herself, even while defending her. This double insulation of David is certainly suggestive; and the failure of any sons of Abigail to figure in the story of the succession to the throne may be related to the strategy of the text: Abigail seems to have been relegated to a secondary political status in David's court. More likely, however, the disappearance of Abigail's sons has to do with the fact that one of them, Amasa, was probably the general of Absalom's rebel army.[11]

10. Readers curious to know which should consult "The Web Companion to Agatha Christie." It would be unfair to spoil the riddle for those who have not encountered the book.

11. See below, Chapter 22; and Jon D. Levenson and Baruch Halpern, "The Political Import of David's Marriages," *JBL* 99 (1980): 507-18.

Case 2: Saul and His Sons at Gilboa

For Saul's death, with his three sons, at Gilboa, the agents of death are the Philistines. At the time, the Philistines were David's allies. So Samuel distances David from the battle of Gilboa, or Jezreel. Both sources (1 Sam. 24; 26) maintain that David had Saul completely in his power, but rejected the urging of subordinates to kill him. David thereby earned Saul's forgiveness and in one case his blessing on David's succession to the throne. This improbable sequence smacks of unusually optimistic partisanship.

In addition, one source (A) denies that David *ever* worked for the Philistines (1 Sam. 21:10-15[11-16]). The other (B) stresses: (1) that Saul's persecution drove David to join the Philistines; (2) that David told his overlord, Achish of Gath, he was raiding Judah when he was really raiding desert camps; (3) that David joined the Philistines at the staging zone for their thrust into the Jezreel, but was detailed to the rear as bodyguard for Achish;[12] and (4) that the other tyrants feared duplicity, and cited the snippet, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his myriads," so that Achish sent him back home. In addition, (5) during the battle, David was off in the south chasing Amaleqites who had raided Ziklag in his absence; (6) when he learned from an Amaleqite, who brought him Saul's regalia, that Saul was dead, and at Saul's request by the Amaleqite's own hand, David killed Saul's killer; and (7) David composed a lament to mourn Saul's and Jonathan's deaths publicly (1 Sam. 24–2 Sam. 1).

Protest? This is a dissertation of denial! But the alibi doesn't even completely remove David from the battle: it admits he was in the Philistine camp, arrayed for war. It concedes that he was a trusted vassal of Achish, who did fight in the battle. It documents not that David killed Saul, but that the accusation that he helped the Philistines to victory had real sting.

A text in Chronicles, five centuries later, illustrates how profoundly embarrassing even this version of events proved to be. 1 Chr. 12:20-21 relates that

> From Manasseh, there defected to David when he came with the Philistines against Saul to battle — and he didn't help them, for in council the tyrants of the Philistines sent him away, saying, "He will defect against our interest to his master, Saul" — When he went to Ziklag, there defected to him from Manasseh [names of recruits follow]

12. 1 Sam. 29:2, to the rear; as a bodyguard, 28:1-2. On the Israelite model of David's era, the bodyguard was unlikely to see frontline action except in the case of a rout in one or another direction. But in other places, and at other times in Israel, the royal guard were front-line shock troops.

There is an epanalepsis, or rhetorical repetition, here: "from Manasseh, there defected to him, when he came to battle" to "when he went to Ziklag, there defected to him from Manasseh. . . ." The information between the two is explanatory: David didn't actually fight Saul, it was only when he returned to Ziklag that these Manassites joined him, while the battle was raging. A scribe has added the qualification, that David did not fight. The original text probably reported that Manassites joined David at Apheq. The source cannot have reached the author of Chronicles in this form, but the awkward reformulation indicates typical Israelite respect for the source, which could instead have been recast as, "And in Ziklag, after the death of Saul, there came to him. . . ." Instead, the text mentions defections at the time of the battle of Jezreel! It probably originally mentioned defections just *before* the battle.

David was at the front. But the mythmaking machinery of the text portrays him as the great slayer of Philistines in his youth: "Is this not David, servant of Saul the king of Israel. . . . Is this not David of whom they chant with flutes, saying, 'Saul has smitten his thousands, and David his myriads'?" (1 Sam. 29:3, 5). Is the story of David's attachment to Saul's court true, or merely a political convenience — balancing and especially justifying his later attachment to Philistia? We shall probably never know, but we should certainly entertain the question.

In the text, David winds up with Saul's regalia: Saul's Amaleqite killer brings it to him (2 Sam. 1). McCarter takes this to be the source of the accusation of complicity in Saul's death. In other words, the text explains how David came to be in physical possession of Saul's crown. The story may be pure invention, foreshadowing David's succession by endowing him with the symbols of kingship. But if not, McCarter must be right.

Even more significant is the complexity of David's alibi for Saul's death. It is *not* the claim of the B source that David went home from the staging area for the battle: during the battle itself, he was careering around the Negev. Why does the account remove David from Ziklag? Why does it have him all but annihilate the Amaleqites he meets during the time of the battle of Jezreel (1 Sam. 30)?

The text not only explains how David came into possession of Saul's regalia, it also explains why he was *not to be found in Ziklag* at the time of Saul's death, despite having been sent home from the battlefield. Had he been in the field, he would have been in the rear, as Achish's bodyguard. And, had he been at the front, he would not have killed Saul, as he had previously demonstrated by sparing that king. All this is curiously reminiscent of the triple defense employed by Earl Rogers in a murder trial: his client was not present on the scene of the crime; if the client was present, he did not commit the murder; and, if he did commit the murder, he was insane at the time.

The claims that David never attacked Israelites when working for the

Philistines, but annihilated his non-Israelite opponents and sent booty to Judah, reinforce the same message.[13] They effectively deny — as in the A source — that David worked for the Philistines at all. They certainly deny that David was capable of working against Israelite interests. This raises the question not just of David's complicity in Saul's defeat and death, but of his relationship with Philistia both before and during his reign.

To put it differently, the text *admits* that David worked for the Philistines. It admits that he was the trusted lieutenant of Achish of Gath. It admits that Achish adjudged him so worthy as to bestow on him the captaincy of an outlying Gittite settlement. It admits that from this base he conducted raids and forays the results of which pleased his Philistine liege lord. It admits in fact that David stood in the royal bodyguard of Gath — a position, in the Near East, affording him easy access to the king, and control of a considerable force of elite soldiers. It admits that he offered Achish, the Philistine king, no harm whatever — so much so that whereas Saul pursues David, Achish merely commends him. It admits that, in his position as royal bodyguard, policing the regular forces of Gath from the center of their command, rather than harmlessly lounging in the rear, David formed up his troops and presented himself at the staging area for the battle of Jezreel. It goes so far as to claim that he protested his dismissal from the battle of Jezreel. It admits, too, that he was absent from his home at the time of the fatal confrontation. It admits that he never confronted Philistines at all, except in the central hills around Jerusalem — long after he was allegedly king of Judah in Hebron. It admits that he came into possession of Saul's crown and other royal insignia stripped at the end of the battle of Jezreel. The text effectively concedes all the most damaging information one could conceive, in order to rescue David from a single suspicion: that he was instrumental in the defeat and death of Saul. So much admission, for so small, and yet so exquisite, a denial.

Consider the following principle: where the author of an ancient text puts himself to the considerable trouble of denying an accusation explicitly, then the historian owes him, at a minimum, the courtesy of taking the accusation seriously. Second Samuel offers a laboratory course in denial. Unlike modern journalism, or antiquarian literature even in ancient times, three of its facets demand attention: what it alleges; what it denies; and what subjects it cools in the refreshing shadow of its silence. In this chapter, our concern is principally with denial, in the political realm, while silence is addressed in connection with its treatment of David's achievements. Denial and silence are the twin engines of the text's most important nuances. What is explicit is perspicuous, is there to

13. 1 Sam. 27:8-12; 30:26-31.

lead the reader. What is unsaid is penumbral, constituting the gray area between what the author dare not and what he cannot say. What is denied, however, throws the author's deepest concerns into sharp relief, defining the character of the explicit remarks in the book.

Case 3: Ishbaal

In this light, Saul's death deserves comparison to that of his successor. If Saul's killers were Philistines, or an Amaleqite, Ishbaal's assassins were Gibeonites, belonging to the ethnic group the Hivvites. They were residents of the town of Beeroth. The Hivvite population of Beeroth had been expelled and, along with other Gibeonites, persecuted by Saul. The assassins, having dispatched the new king, race to David in Hebron — just as the Amaleqite who killed Saul had done. Ishbaal's killers deliver up the king's head, David being already in possession of the crown. As in Saul's case, David strings the killers up. He also cuts off their arms and legs and displays their torsos by the Pool in Hebron (see further Chapter 17).

Notably, instead of sending it back for burial, David keeps Ishbaal's head with Abner's remains in Hebron, away from the house of Saul (2 Sam. 4:6-8, 12). The significance of retaining control over corpses was not lost on David, who never repatriated the remains of Saul and Jonathan from Jabesh Gilead until *after* he had wiped out Saul's remaining descendants, Mephibaal being the sole exception. Only in 2 Sam. 21:12-14 are the male heirs executed at Gibeon, and Saul and Jonathan removed to the tomb of Saul's father, Kish. As Mephibaal was confined to Jerusalem, David effectively prevented the development of a royal ancestral cult at Saul's tomb or, in fact, a tomb specific to the head of the dynasty. It is not reported that he ever removed either Ishbaal's head or Abner's remains to the dynastic tomb.

In the aftermath of Ishbaal's assassination, the northern kingdom falls into David's lap. If David commissioned the killing, or even solicited tenders on a contract, his killing the assassins is standard mob-style procedure. The text *admits* that the death was providential for David — it is as providential, we read, as Saul's death (2 Sam. 4:9-10).

Note the formulation of David's speech:

> As Yahweh lives, who redeemed my life from all trouble, when the one who told me, 'Lo, Saul is dead,' — and he thought himself an herald of glad tidings — I seized him and slew him in Ziklag, which is how I rewarded him for glad tidings. But when wicked men have slain an inno-

> cent man in his house on his bed, must I not now seek his bloodguilt from your hands, and expunge you from the land?

Yahweh has indeed redeemed David's life from trouble, both by killing Saul and by killing Ishbaal, without David's involvement.[14]

Anyone familiar with contemporary paranoia about public life — in an age of abundant journalistic monitoring and information — will recognize that David's political opponents *must* have accused him of Ishbaal's murder. The punishment of the killers, like Saul's Amaleqite not significant political players, indicates that he understood the danger that he would indeed be accused. What is more, the killers are Gibeonites, who, we shall see, were David's allies. Chances are, David commissioned the hit.

Case 4: Abner

Just before Ishbaal's murder, Abner's death is a tidy little bonus. Abner was Warwick to Ishbaal's Edward IV, claims the text. He was Ishbaal's second-in-command. The text describes a quarrel between the two, over Abner's alleged relations with one of Saul's concubines (2 Sam. 3:7-11). Yet, in 1 Kgs. 2, Solomon executes his brother Adonijah for *asking* for one of David's concubines. "Ask for him the kingship," he tells Bathsheba, the alleged intermediary of the request, then dispatches the reliable Benaiah to execute him. Each text assumes that relations with a concubine establish a claim on the throne. How believable is this in either instance? As we shall see, it is part of the patterned strategies of exculpation that repeatedly characterize this author's work.

Abner is alienated by Ishbaal's accusation. He then acquires Michal, Saul's daughter (2 Sam. 3:13-16), on Ishbaal's order, and brings her, *with 20 atten-*

14. 2 Sam. 4:9-11. Note the response to the incurred bloodguilt: it must be driven out of the land. This is usually thought to be Deuteronomic language, but Deuteronomy speaks only of expunging evil *(r')* from "your midst" or "from Israel," or of expunging "innocent blood" *(dm nqy)* "from Israel" (Deut. 19:13), or "from your midst" (21:9). References outside ritual contexts (Deut. 26:13, 14) are found in 13:5[6]; 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21, 24; 24:7 ("from your midst"); 17:12; 22:22 ("from Israel"). Usage in Kings in Deuteronomistic contexts is "burn/drive 'after' you" (or "the last of you"? 1 Kgs. 14:10; 16:3; 21:21) or just "burn/drive out" (2 Kgs. 23:24). In the last instance, the context may imply "from the land," but this is explicit outside of 2 Sam. 4:11 only in 1 Kgs. 22:46, in the evaluation of Jehoshaphat; 2 Chr. 19:3 (a speech to Jehoshaphat in part inspired by the report in Kings). The point is that in 2 Sam. 4:11; 1 Kgs. 22:46, the land is what is polluted and must be cleansed, whereas in Deuteronomy it is the covenant community that is affected. In most cases in Kings, the question of what is polluted is not addressed.

dants, to an allegedly secret assignation in Hebron. At this feast, he promises to dump Ishbaal and translate Israelite support to David. Abner departs in peace, an ally. But he had earlier killed Joab's brother Asahel in open battle. And Joab, without David's knowledge (3:26), therefore exacts vengeance.

The story of the assignation occupies 11 verses (2 Sam. 3:17-27). It requires twelve verses to exculpate David. In them, David declares his innocence, curses the house of Joab's otherwise unnamed father, proclaims mourning, conducts a state funeral, elegizes Abner, eulogizes Abner, fasts all the way to sunset, and, the narrator says, persuades all Israel of his innocence. It was not the king's idea to kill Abner. Rather, Joab and Abishai bushwacked Abner for killing Asahel.[15]

The exculpation is longer than the story. But the story, too, is apology: it carefully and categorically denies that David had a motive for the murder. Abner delivered Michal, giving David a claim on the throne, although with Ishbaal's connivance. He campaigned for David among the Israelite elders. He promised to make David king. But Joab gummed up the works: he pursued his vendetta even though Abner had killed Asahel in open battle, and reluctantly at that. Joab, we later learn explicitly, shed the blood of war within the framework of a peaceful relationship. Yet Joab suffers only David's curse: there is no nonverbal reprisal for the murder. The elaborate apparatus of defenses indicates that this murder, like that of Ishbaal, was a live issue when this text — and probably Joab — were framed.[16]

Even highly critical readers, such as Gösta Ahlström,[17] take this story at face value. Abner was a fellow that David had every reason to protect. But it is very easy to imagine — and it is a certainty that many ancients did — that a crafty and unctuous David lured Abner to Hebron for a peace conference. Offering Abner traditional hospitality, safe conduct, and promises of accommo-

15. Some scholars argue that 2 Sam. 3:30 is secondary, based on the allegation that Abishai played no role in the murder of Abner. This is specious reasoning: Joab plunged the knife in, but someone else must have occupied or restrained Abner's 20 retainers (3:20). Or possibly slaughtered them. This verse is absolutely critical, because it clearly indicates that Abner killed Asahel *in battle* — just as 2 Sam. 2 has him repeatedly warn Asahel before killing him — to make a simple point: Joab killed someone with whom he was in an alliance, with whom he was at peace; Abner, who killed in battle, should have been exempt from blood vengeance. Note the contrast in 3:30: in MT, Joab and Abishai *hrgw,* whereas Abner *hmyt* — here apparently marking a difference between killing in alliance/peace and in war. The theme that Abner left David "in peace/in alliance" in vv. 21, 22, 23 assumes importance in the account of Joab's death.

16. See McCarter, *II Samuel,* 120-22.

17. *A History of Ancient Palestine.* JSOTSup 146 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 465.

dation, or even submission, David turned on him and killed him. This is the technique later employed by Absalom against Amnon — the forgive-and-forget banquet followed by homicide. Lethal deception ran in the family.

The concession of Michal might seem to speak against this possibility — the more so in that the author of 2 Sam. 3 adduces it as evidence of the situation. However, it is likely that David made diplomatic recognition a condition of his submission to Ishbaal. In this case, he will have demanded, in token of his special status, that he be permitted to marry the king's sister. In exchange, he must have promised a treasure — including, perhaps, a harvest of Philistine foreskins — for the princess.

The promise of submission led naturally to the dispatching of a peace delegation. Abner's group of 20 retainers, on the face of things, resembles such a delegation far more than it does some secret conspiracy. To be sure, 2 Samuel maintains that Abner had already declaimed his traitorous intentions publicly at court; but one would think that were Ishbaal powerless to oppose Abner, the latter would have seized the throne himself. Indeed, the most suspicious element of the entire story is the claim that *Ishbaal* ordered the sending of Michal to David's court. The text actually claims that he connived with Abner at his own dethronement, yet remained David's opponent after Abner's death. David's request for Michal was couched in terms of submission or alliance, not defiance. Only in such a case would Ishbaal's acquiescence serve a political purpose.

Case 5: Saul's Other Descendants

David's next kills are by inspiration. In 2 Sam. 21 Yahweh inflicts a famine on the land. In response to David's petition, Yahweh lets out that the famine was his way of punishing (David's!) Israel for Saul's violation of a divinely guaranteed treaty: Saul had attacked the Gibeonites. The Gibeonites, to satisfy the wrong, demand seven of Saul's male heirs in retribution, and hang them — two sons by Rizpah bat-Ayya, and five grandsons by Saul's eldest daughter.[18] The

18. McCarter *(II Samuel, ad loc.)* is certainly right that the point of 2 Sam. 6:22-23 is that Michal remained childless to the day of her death because David broke off relations with her and in effect imprisoned her. So the sister in 2 Sam. 21:8, who is married to Ad/zriel son of Barzillai the Meholatite (1 Sam. 18:19), not Paltiel ben-Laish (2 Sam. 3:15), must be Merab. Barzillai the Meholatite is probably identical with Barzillai from Rogelim in Gilead. Abel Meholah was right on the Jordan (1 Kgs. 4:12; Judg. 7:22). Another option is to derive this Barzillai from the Manassite clan of Mahlah. Note not just that the taking of Mephibaal to court is related before the Absalom revolt, but that the disposition of

Gibeonites had now learned to kill Saul's scions only on official pretexts, and the seven males were a sort of compensation for the martyrdom of Ishbaal's assassins. David spares Mephibaal, Jonathan's lame son, and brings him to court permanently — a safe place, betimes, for the lone Saulide heir.[19] David generously left Mephibaal half of Saul's estates in a Solomonic decision after Absalom's revolt.[20]

The killing of Saul's descendants sparked accusations in David's time. Remarkably, one accusation is preserved. As David abandoned Jerusalem at the start of the Absalom revolt, Shimei, a member of Saul's clan, reviled him, calling, "Go, go, Man of Blood, and Hellion. Yahweh has requited you all the bloodguilt of the house of Saul, whom you succeeded . . ." (2 Sam. 16:7-8). Man of Blood, an epithet levied against Lincoln by American southerners during the Civil War, is a peculiarly compelling phrase. It implies bloodguilt, that is, designates the object of the opprobrium as a murderer. And the text concurs that David was a Man of Blood — but, it claims, the blood on his hands was that of Uriah, first husband of Solomon's mother.[21]

Shimei charges that David manipulated the results of oracles so as to rid himself of potential rallying points for resistance. There is direct textual linkage in that the story of the killings at Gibeon begins by reference to Saul's house's

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Mephibaal's (i.e., all of Saul's — 2 Sam. 9:7) estates is decided immediately afterward. Thus the killings must predate the revolt.

19. The submission of 2 Sam. 9:1-6 is that Mephibaal is the sole remaining male Saulide with whom David can "act in good faith for the sake of Jonathan." Jonathan's lame son is in the house of Machir ben-Ammiel in Lo Debar. Mephibaal's relocation to the court precedes the Absalom revolt, since it is on the basis of his failure to evacuate Jerusalem that David strips him of half of Saul's estates.

20. 2 Sam. 9 presents Ziba as an old retainer of Saul, with 15 sons and a large staff. Regardless whether this was the case, or whether David assigned a stooge of his own to be steward, Ziba obviously found common interests with David. Kickbacks to David were undoubtedly part of this mix — explicitly, in terms of Mephibaal's maintenance at court, but no doubt above and beyond it. See below, Chapter 21.

21. Solomon explains to Hiram in 1 Kgs. 5:3-4(17-18) that David did not build the temple because he was constantly occupied with war; the issue there is one of time, and Solomon, now at peace, is able to undertake the project. The interpretation of the passage is that David was at peace in 2 Sam. 7:1, and had time to move the ark, but next came his conquests (2 Sam. 8). In 1 Chr. 22:7-8, David tells Solomon that Yhwh had refused him (David) permission to build the temple because he had spilled much blood and fought many wars. In this interpretation, which plays on the similarity between Solomon's name and the word *šālôm,* "peace, harmony," the refusal of permission in 2 Sam. 7 (1 Chr. 17) stemmed from the fact that David was a warrior. But even here, the refusal comes ahead of Uriah's murder.

bloodguilt: For Shimei, David is "the man of bloodguilt," responsible for "all the blood of the house of Saul." In 2 Sam. 21:1, Yahweh announces, "To Saul and to his house there is bloodguilt" because he killed the Gibeonites.[22] But Shimei does not say, "Yahweh has requited you for all the blood of the house of Saul which YOU spilled," as distinct from anyone else. He says, "Yahweh has requited you for ALL the blood of the house of Saul."

McCarter accordingly includes in Shimei's accusation Saul and his sons at Gilboa, Abner, Ishbaal, and the seven grandchildren.[23] David even demanded the separation of Saul's daughter Michal from her husband before condemning her to celibacy and executing her sister's children. He thus controlled the *production* of Saulides. And, one might add, a curious piece of narrative legerdemain concerns Jonathan's lame son, Mephibaal: the steward, Ziba, accuses Mephibaal, *at the time of Absalom's revolt,* of expecting a restoration to his "father's" — Saul's — throne. Though Mephibaal's lameness and appearance later expose this claim as opportunistic, the author intends that the reader, like David, should believe it at the time (2 Sam. 16:1-4; 19:24-30[25-31]). In other words, the reader is to understand, or is perhaps expected to bring the understanding to the textual table, that the fate the Saulides suffered at David's hands was a very live issue indeed at the time of the Absalom revolt, late in the reign.

Overall, in the aftermath of the battle of Gilboa, David can be said to have adopted a policy of systematic extermination toward the house of Saul, rather like Henry VII knocking off Plantagenets and scapegoating Richard III, or like Dennis Price knocking off Alec Guinness 17 times in *Kind Hearts and Coronets.* David even retained Ishbaal's head and Abner's corpse in Hebron, and he repatriated the bodies of Saul and Jonathan from the men of Jabesh Gilead — who stole them from Beth Shan (Stratum VI) — only on the deaths of all the other heirs (2 Sam. 21:12-14). But David carefully preserved Mephibaal's life, confining him instead to the court and stripping him of his estates; and he refrained from killing his accuser, Shimei. Characteristically, he shows remarkable forbearance toward this foe, publicly restraining Abishai, and his brother Joab no doubt, from killing him both before and after his victory (2 Sam. 16:5-13; 19:22-23): Joab and Abishai had taken the lead in attacking Saulides since the

22. *'îš had-dāmîm, kōl dĕmê bêt-šā'ûl,* 2 Sam. 16:7-8; *'el šā'ûl wĕ-'el bêtô dāmîm,* 2 Sam. 21:1. The linkage is concrete, and the difference in authority is that the narrator has Shimei speaking in 16:7-8, but Yahweh speaking in 21:1. Saul was the one who incurred bloodguilt, not David. However, it must have been somewhat galling to David that Shimei's accusation had the matter out in the open, and it is almost possible to believe that David let him live in order to disprove the allegation, then asked Solomon to murder him, as the text claims.

23. McCarter, *II Samuel, ad loc.*

episode when Saul himself lay in David's power (1 Sam. 26:8). With Mephibaal and Shimei, the moderate, merciful David maintained a token hostage and his accuser to show that there was nothing to the accusation. This is one more alibi.

Now, although the Saulides are for the most part disposed of before the time of the Absalom revolt, theirs are not the only deaths of which David is accused or from which he is exculpated. Uriah's murder is conceded by the text, and taken to be the cause of Absalom's revolt. The latter also has a proximate cause, namely, Amnon's rape of Tamar.

Case 6: Amnon

Amnon was David's eldest son, borne by Ahinoam from Jezreel (2 Sam. 3:2). Two women bear this name: Saul's wife (1 Sam. 14:50) and David's. Yahweh also tells David through Nathan, "I gave you your master's house and your master's women to your bosom" (2 Sam. 12:8). So there is a good chance that David's first wife was Saul's wife first.[24] There are also two Jezreels — one in Israel, the later winter capital of Ahab and Jezebel (as 2 Kgs. 10:1; Hos. 1:4) and scene of Saul's last battle (1 Sam. 29:11), and one in Judah. A 7th-century text, Josh. 15:56, attests the occupation of the site in Judah, but there is no indication it was occupied before that time.[25] Likely, Ahinoam came from the northern Jezreel, on the eastern side of the Jezreel Valley under Mount Gilboa. The chances are that she was either Saul's wife or associated with the group from which Saul had taken his wife.

Here, again, is a providence for David. The rapist, Amnon, is the heir presumptive, representing the most prosperous ambitions of an important political constituency. The ravaged sister's grandfather is a foreign kinglet, Talmay king of Geshur, useful for threatening northern Israel (2 Sam. 3:3). Further, if the rapist was borne by Saul's former wife, his removal eliminates the last vestiges of Saul's legacy from the succession — it is a part of David's extermination of the Saulide line. Possibly, David instigated the rape: after all, Jonadab, David's nephew, counseled Amnon, yet thereafter remained in good odor in court,

24. See Levenson and Halpern, 507-18.

25. On the date of Josh. 15, see among others Albrecht Alt, "Judas Gaue unter Josia," *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israels* 2 (Munich: Beck, 1953), 276-88; Frank Moore Cross, Jr., and George Ernest Wright, "The Boundary and Province Lists of the Kingdom of Judah," *JBL* 75 (1956): 202-26; Zekharyah Kallai, *Historical Geography of the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986), 115-24, 334-97. Alt's position has been repeatedly vindicated by excavations and by surveys (notably, excavations at Ein Gedi, Tel ʿIra, Ḥorvat ʿUza; surveys by Rudolf Cohen, William G. Dever).

according to the text (2 Sam. 13:3-5, 32-33). Provocateur or free agent? His continued good standing inclines one to the former interpretation. Even more providential: the avenger is next in line for the succession.[26]

David is immobile. Absalom models himself on David's murder of Abner, and after two years invites his brothers to a feast, at which he murders Amnon (2 Sam. 13:23-29). David's alibi is that he first believes Absalom has killed all his brothers and then mourns Amnon demonstratively (2 Sam. 13:30-36). But, as noted above, David takes no stock in the dead. Absence makes his heart grow forgetful, especially if the removal was intended from the first as a part of the extermination of contenders for the throne connected to the House of Saul.

Unlike Joab, and unlike the killers of Saul and Ishbaal, Absalom flees. For murder inside groups, expulsion is a common custom. It is attested in the Bible, where Cain, Simeon, and Levi are all landless because they have killed — allies. The adoptive Egyptian, Moses, also flees into the wilderness after killing a member of his own putative group. In other cultures, the fugitive is repatriated after a period of some years.[27]

26. The best list of David's early offspring seems to be that in 2 Sam. 3:2-5, which enumerates the eldest sons of six wives in order to imply that Solomon would be the eldest surviving son of the seventh. This list is duplicated in 1 Chr. 3:1-4, but 3:5 lists Solomon last among four sons of "Bath-Shua" = Bathsheba, daughter of Ammiel, then enumerates nine more sons before excluding sons of concubines and mentioning Tamar. Chronicles has duplicated the list of 2 Sam. 5:14-16, taking the children of 5:14 (achronologically) as those of Bathshua/Bathsheba. The list in Samuel has no such implications, as 2 Sam. 5:13 makes clear. The variant on Bathsheba's name in Chronicles may be exegetical, drawing a connection to Gen. 38 (vv. 2 and 6, the latter involving a Tamar). Or it may be intended to avoid connecting her with the Sibitti, or Seven Gods, to which the element -Sheba ties her. It is possible that the element baal, in the names of the Saulides Ishbaal and Meribaal (here, Mephibaal) in Chronicles, but -boshet in Samuel, is also intended to link Saul to (the) baal. See Gordon J. Hamilton, *CBQ* 60 (1998): 228-50.

27. See Emrys L. Peters, "Some Structural Aspects of the Feud among the Camel-Herding Bedouin of Cyrenaica," *Africa* 37 (1967): 261-82. Cf. Oedipus' *miasma* at Thebes. But note also that Moses returns from the wilderness on the death of the king, and that killers resident in "cities of refuge" can return to their holdings after the death of a high priest in the legal theory of P (Num. 35:9-34; cf. Deut. 19:1-13, which probably contemplates such a return after legal proceedings in the town of origin). The stories about Cain, Simeon, and Levi are etiologies for a nomadic lifestyle, nomads being identified in this culture with those who have been driven, for one or another reason, from the settled lands. See latterly, Eckart Otto, "Gewaltvermeidung und -überwindung in Recht und Religion Israels," in *Dramatische Erlösungslehre,* ed. J. Niewiadomski and W. Palaver (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1992), 97-117, esp. 98-99, with further citations and discussion. Otto goes on to observe (100) that the legal strategy of the Covenant Code is to impose death sanctions within the family (Exod. 21:12, 15-17), and this is also indicated by the speech of the Wise

Absalom spends three years with his grandfather, the king of Geshur (2 Sam. 13:38). But Geshur, in the southern Golan, was within the ambit of David's domination or, certainly, menace, by the late part of his reign. He held northern Transjordan before Absalom's revolt. Absalom could have been extradited readily enough. And who is the agent of Absalom's repatriation? Joab. Joab "tricks" David into letting the lad come home, even though David is alive to the deception (2 Sam. 14:1-23). David does not readmit Absalom to the court for a period of two more years (2 Sam. 14:24, 28); but Joab, who previously had refused to intercede with David (14:29), does a complete turnabout after Absalom torches his crops, and the rehabilitation is complete (14:30-33).

This looks like a put-up job. David had a problem, which Absalom solved. Absalom took the consequences and returned to court — the return greased by Joab. Yet if there was a deal between David and Absalom, it probably involved assurances that vengeance would bring Absalom nearer the crown. And, after five years, Absalom may have found matters at court different from when he left: our grandson of a foreign kinglet may have faced some pretty stiff fraternal opposition. And any commitments that David may have made either before Amnon's death or at the time of Absalom's repatriation were very likely undone by the time of the revolt.

Case 7: Absalom

Absalom's death is as straightforward as Amnon's. David charges his commanders in hearing of the troops not to harm his son, and sends them into battle against him (2 Sam. 18:5). Joab kills Absalom nonetheless, while Absalom is hanging helpless by his hair in a tree — his hair not falling to the ground

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Woman of Tekoa in 2 Sam. 14:5-7, where the typical expectation is that fratricide will be punished by death. So one of the causes of the Absalom revolt in the mind of the author of 2 Samuel is David's willingness to take a humanitarian — noncentral — view of crime within a family. However, the indications are that the culture was less than monolithic in this respect, and that the legislation of the Covenant Code regarding the family reflects the interests of the state. Note especially the regulations regarding refuge starting in Exod. 21:13. The same statist ideology presumably underlies 2 Samuel, which, however, portrays David's decision as essentially compassionate and familial. Note Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), arguing that the earliest Greek literary texts presuppose inevitable conflict between human behavior that would later be regarded as "ethical" and the actual nature of the universe. 2 Samuel would seem to present a parallel instance.

(2 Sam. 18:9-15). David mourns publicly (2 Sam. 19:1[2]), as in the case of the Saulide victims. And, Joab remains on the general staff.

One need not go so far as to say, though it is amusing to insinuate, that David *intended* to drive Absalom to revolt. For the result of that uprising was to establish the total superiority of David's professional army over the tribal levies.[28] But whatever David's conscious intentions, it is easy enough to see how Absalom might come to rebel. And it is also easy to see how the man of action, who acquitted the family honor, might score points particularly with the state hierarchy, which seems to have stood behind him.

At any rate, David's public insistence that Absalom be spared is of a piece, literarily, with his refusal to kill Saul, his mourning of Saul, Jonathan, Ishbaal, and Abner, and his inability to punish Joab, Amnon, or, in the end, Absalom after Amnon's death. In constructing a character for him, the author of the apology permits all the alibis and explanations to interlace in a network of mutual support: if David could not kill Saul, how could he kill Absalom? One might argue David's public instruction to the brigade commanders that they spare Absalom is an authentic report, for the text claims that the entire force heard the admonition. But even if so, what is omitted is any charge that David may have communicated to his commanders privately. He did not want to see Absalom, whose popularity far exceeded his own, survive the day.

Case 8: Amasa

The case of Amasa is perhaps the clearest assassination in which David is implicated. Amasa, the military commander in the Absalom revolt, is also David's nephew, and quite possibly his step-son.[29] This is an important indication that

28. And in a way, this is how David created Solomon: he left a legacy of military domination that enabled Solomon to stage an instant coup d'état, and then cement his grip with a set of bloody murders. See Halpern, *The Constitution of the Monarchy,* 242-44; "The Uneasy Compromise: Israel between League and Monarchy," in *Traditions in Transformation: Turning-Points in Biblical Faith,* ed. Halpern and Jon D. Levenson. Festschrift Frank Moore Cross (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1981), 59-96, esp. 91-95.

29. It is often overlooked that Amasa must also have been a senior officer under David, and was a member of the royal family, being the son of Joab's aunt, David's sister, and probably wife, Abigail. 1 Chronicles places Amasa in David's army, possibly on this basis, in 12:18(19). On Amasa's father, Yitra the "Israelite" or "Jezreelite" (not "Ishmaelite"), and his likely identity with Abigail's first husband, Nabal, see Levenson and Halpern. 1 Chr. 2:17 identifies Amasa's father as an Ishmaelite, while MT of 2 Sam. 17:25 has him as an Israelite, and the versions there either as an Israelite (most versions), an Ishmaelite (G^A and

even within the royal family and the professional army, the revolt was not confined to Absalom. After his victory, in a concession to the rebels, David installs Amasa in Joab's place as commander of the tribal armies (2 Sam. 19:13-14[14-15]).

Immediately after demobilization, however, the revolt of Sheba ben-Bichri breaks out. David gives Amasa three days to remobilize the weekend soldiers of Judah whom he commands. But the muster of the tribe has just gone home, defeated. *Mirabile dictu,* Amasa misses the deadline. There was no hope of the troops obeying an immediate summons to renewed service in short order. If anything, they would have suspected treachery on David's part merely at being called up. The predictably dilatory response is, however, convenient for David. The king dispatches the standing army, under Abishai. These slouch north to Gibeon — where David hanged Saul's heirs — to rendezvous with Amasa. Joab takes this worthy aside for a kiss, and with his left hand thrusts a dagger into his belly (2 Sam. 20:1-13).

Again, David stands to benefit. He has just suffered the humiliation of appointing a rebel general his commander-in-chief. And the revolt during which Amasa is killed turns out to consist of one miserable flea, a man without a following, who takes refuge in a town on Israel's remote northern border, probably in a neighboring kingdom at the time. Sheba's head is unceremoniously lobbed over the wall of Abel of the House of Maacah to the waiting Joab, while the town, without opening its gate, professes its Israelite identity (this is perhaps the story of its annexation). Surely, Sheba was the sorriest revolutionary in history. As McCarter has pointed out, the apology, again, blames Amasa's death on Joab, whom David did not even send — it was Abishai who called him.[30] Now, David may have forgotten that Joab had just killed Absalom, and that Abishai was Joab's brother, and had been complicit in Abner's murder. Circumstantial evidence, as Pudd'nhead Wilson's calendar remarks, can be misleading. Joab returns to the general staff. The citizens of Judah, Absalom's partisans, must have held the unshakeable conviction that David ordered the murder.

The repeated exculpation of David for complicity in providential deaths indicates that accusations were contemporary.[31] Even today, in the Manichaean political universe we tend to inhabit, our opponents represent the children of

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others), or a Jezreelite (one Old Greek witness, several miniscules, G^{M}, and probably others). 1 Chr. 12:18(19), however, names him as a Benjaminite recruit to David's cause, presupposing that the father was an Israelite. This may be derivative. See 2 Sam. 20:4-12; 1 Kgs. 2:32; possibly 1 Chr. 15:24 = 6:25, 34(10, 20).

30. McCarter, *II Samuel,* 432.

31. See esp. Vanderkam; McCarter, *JBL* 99 (1980): 489-504.

darkness. With the exception of Gerald Ford, no American president in living memory wasn't evil incarnate to somebody. And even Ford had his Squeaky Fromme. In the early 1990s, the weekly journal *MacLeans* reported that fewer Canadians (12%) supported their then prime minister, Brian Mulroney, than believed that Elvis Presley was alive (17%), a decade after his death. Moving from paranoid demonization of the Other — which establishes that our texts are early — to historical reconstruction presents some difficulties, but the general pattern suggests that murder was an implement of choice in David's strategy for the construction of ethnicity. And the role of states-in-formation in the imposition of ethnicity is more complex and varied than the best theories of state-formation allow.

The *modi operandi* are limited: Joab removes Abner, Absalom, Amasa, Sheba, and, on David's orders, Uriah. He never suffers sanction, except for a three-day-long demotion under Amasa — by the time the army reaches Abel, he is in charge of it again. Three times the killers are aliens: the Philistines kill Saul and three of his sons, and Gibeonites kill the others. Once the killer is David's son. It is convenient for David if somebody dies, and somebody else kills him. This holds for Nabal (natural death), Saul and his three sons (killer: Philistines), Abner (killer: Joab), Ishbaal (killer: Gibeonites [from Beeroth]), Saul's heirs (killer: Gibeonites), Uriah (killer: Joab), Amnon (killer: Absalom), Absalom (killer: Joab), Amasa (killer: Joab), and Sheba (killer: Abel Maacah acting for Joab). Three deaths (Abner, Uriah, Adonijah) involve fallings-out over married women, plus a fourth if we include Abigail and Nabal. Three times the killers are themselves killed — the assassins of Saul and of Ishbaal, and Absalom, killer of Amnon. In the cases of Saul and Jonathan, Abner, Amnon, and Absalom, David leads public mourning. David has emotional or blood bonds with several victims — Jonathan, Amnon, Absalom, Amasa, and Joab. He has a contract with (not on) Abner. He refrained from killing Saul when he had the chance, as well as Shimei. And he is never on the scene of a murder at all: he is present only at the executions of the Amaleqite who killed Saul, and of the Beerothites who killed Ishbaal, for which he explicitly claims credit.

Case 9: Uriah

It is instructive to compare with the others the one case in which the narrative concedes, or rather asserts, that David murdered, the story of Uriah. Uriah's absence from his marital bed — and David's taking his place on it — have created a situation in which Bathsheba's adultery is bound to become apparent. The

narrator then assumes that readers will agree: it is therefore necessary that Uriah die. This presupposes that the punishment for adultery, once discovered, is death; that the punishment could not be avoided by the payment of an indemnity; and that David did not wish to flout the law.

This last seems awfully unlikely. David's general lawlessness was well known to his subordinates. Even if he acted out the alibis the texts describe, his partisans can only have been fooled by willful collusion in believing them. In addition, David could always have blamed Bathsheba's son on some underling, or a convenient foreigner. If, for some strange reason, he lacked the stomach for casting the blame on some innocent party — in this one case — he still had other options. The Middle Assyrian Laws allow for the payment of indemnities, or even forgiveness by the wronged husband, in cases of adultery. David could thus have forced Uriah to demand only symbolic reparation. Oddly enough, the one case in which the text proclaims David's guilt is implausible. But the presentation is nonetheless revealing.

Compelled to kill Uriah, David uses the victim himself as the unwitting bearer of the order that he be killed. Through Uriah, David secretly instructs Joab to arrange a setback in battle. In this, Uriah is not the only casualty: David deliberately sacrifices a number of warriors, and exposes others, who survive, to mortal danger, in order to rid himself of the victim of his own appetites. Joab, even under written instruction, fears a rebuke for adopting the inept tactic necessitated by his objective. He instructs the messenger of defeat to mention to David that Uriah died in the foray. And David, immediately, forgets the dead, as is his nature: "The sword," he says, "consumes randomly."

David wants a man dead. He secretly tells Joab to kill him. Joab has him killed at the hands of enemy warriors. The pattern is precisely the same as in the other cases, except that here the secret communication between David and Joab, and the reasons for David's machinations, are exposed — by divine revelation. The source takes considerable pains, here, to assert that David was indeed a killer. So it must have an interest in the concession.[32] His alleged victim, however, is a man of little political importance, apparently without children, a foreigner, employed as a mercenary rather than situated in a lineage. Uriah's name is qualified only by his ethnic affiliation without even the name of his father as a mark of identity, and he is not a scion of Saul's. It is only from other

32. Standard procedure among critics is either to regard the story of Uriah as the start of a "Succession Narrative" that is different in origin from the "History of David's Rise" or to excise the story as "secondary" — a late insertion. This recourse reflects a lack of clarity as to the agenda of 2 Samuel, on which see below, Chapter 22. The text makes sense *only* shortly after David's time.

texts that we can infer that Uriah's wife was Ahitophel's granddaughter (see below, Chapter 22).

It was particularly important that Joab engineer the death of Uriah. The author of Samuel intended to expose the irony in Joab's role in bringing on the Absalom revolt, the punishment for David's adultery with Bathsheba. He particularly meant to justify Joab's execution by Solomon. The technique that the author ascribes to David in this case is exactly the one that David's opponents, who numbered most of the population of Cisjordan, must have imagined in the others. Yet note the differences. Politically, Uriah's is the least motivated, and thus least obvious, of David's murders. The sword consumes randomly in battle, so the stratagem is an undetectable method of killing. Uriah himself carried the order for his death, so no one other than David and Joab were privy to it.

Probably, the story, down to the account of the adultery, is untrue. But false or true, it attributes a subtlety, a professionalism, to David that is remarkable. So long as David and Joab kept silent, divine revelation was the only possible means of exposure. For real certainty, in this case, could not follow from a coincidence of an affair between David and Bathsheba and the subsequent death of Uriah. It looks as though David has been framed for Uriah's death, while he is alibied for all the others. Why? An answer is offered at the end of the discussion, in Chapter 22.

C. The Apology and the Absalom Revolt

This question, and the patterns of the killings, lead to another question: why is the Absalom story told as it is? It exonerates David of Amasa's murder, and justifies the execution of Sheba. It also acquits David of proximate responsibility for the uprising.

Still, on balance, the account advertises the justice of Absalom's lost cause. First, Absalom is Yahweh's tool for fulfilling the curse David brought upon himself: Absalom's career is David's punishment for adultery and murder. Second, Absalom is the wronged party in the instance of his sister's rape. He avenges this atrocity with the only means at his disposal, and nevertheless must endure the punishment normally accorded a murderer, rather than an executioner.

Third, the entire nation rises with Absalom, and regards David as a "man of blood" for his treatment of the house of Saul. He is viewed as a thug. Fourth, the apology in Samuel claims that David was not merely reluctant to see Absalom dead, but adamant that the rebel be spared. Fifth, David actually promises to appoint, and for a few days does appoint, Absalom's chief of staff to be his own secretary of the army.

This explains why the promise of dynasty in 2 Sam. 7 is postponed from David, with the charter for building a temple, onto his successor. 2 Samuel claims that, after the dynastic charter, David merited death for killing Uriah. Only the terms of the charter prevented Yahweh from rejecting his dynasty. Later texts, in Kings and Psalms, take the opposite view: it was David's merit that trumped Solomon's sins; "for the sake of ('my servant') David," Yahweh preserves the dynasty in Judah. In comparison, 2 Samuel goes out of its way to stress David's defects.

Absalom's revolt is Yahweh's way of punishing David for Uriah's death. It is to underscore this point that the text identifies David as Yahweh's agent when he contributes to the process and relents about Absalom's exile. This is also why Ahitophel's advice, that Absalom sleep with his father's wives on the palace roof, also leads to the caesura comparing Ahitophel to a divine oracle. It is certainly extraordinary for any dynasty to concede that a revolt it successfully suppressed was ordained by its god. The case may even be unique.

Near Eastern royal literature attributes defeats to divine anger: Mesha of Moab maintains that Israel had conquered Moab, before he liberated it, because the Moabite god Chemosh was "angry with the land." Amos and the classical prophets attribute Israelite defeats to Yahweh's anger. But delegitimating one's own dynasty, even temporarily, is a remarkable tactic of persuasion: only a usurper like Solomon, who pushed aside and then executed the heir expected by "all Israel" to sit on the throne (1 Kgs. 2:15), would adopt it. The tactic is a call for allies from among the antagonists of the establishment.

If the revolt was Yahweh's doing, the participants, as Yahweh's instruments, bear no guilt for their treason. This element of the apology, like the others, is conciliatory. Indeed, the appointment of Amasa, albeit fleeting, the promise to spare Shimei, and the claim that David campaigned actively in other ways for re-election by both Judah and Israel after his victory, indicate that the policy of conciliation was initiated from the time of the revolt. Even the reasons for the rebellion are obscured — Absalom made extravagant campaign promises, is what we read.[33] But the real grievances are not articulated, except to be dismissed in the rest of the history: David murdered Saul's heirs, David's opponents claimed. We can, however, depend on the fact that an even more gruesome history of bullying and bloodshed underlies the united opposition of the population of Cisjordan to David personally, not necessarily to his dynasty — the uprising is led by his son, and the troops are commanded by his nephew.

33. 2 Sam. 15:1-6. This is almost certainly a code for a promise of lowering popular obligations to the state, or ending corruption, or placing both administration and the means of corruption in the hands of the lineage structures. See further below, Chapter 21.

The suppression of the grievances from the literary account, like the portrayal of the revolt as divinely inspired, stems from the strategy of reconciliation. The apology is irrelevant at any significant remove from Solomon's reign. And this coincides with Hayim Tadmor's piquant observation that this sort of elaborate royal apology tends to arise early in the reigns of kings whose mothers were heavily involved in a contested succession.[34]

Another pattern confirms this argument. For all the political deaths, David is furnished with an alibi. The list includes Nabal, Saul, and Jonathan,[35] Abner, Ishbaal, Absalom, Amasa. And a famine and Yahweh's oracle forced his hand with the rest of the House of Saul. His behavior in all these cases is woven together with the character stamped upon him by the author of the apology: his unconventionality, his forbearance toward foes, validates his every political alibi. The man who does not mourn after the death of the son of his adultery is extravagantly demonstrative whenever an enemy, including his rebel son Absalom, dies. In other words, David's alleged unconventionality is the counterspin to claims he was a monster.

The flip side of the pattern is more important. The killings for which David *is* made responsible, in which his character shifts, are two executions, of Shimei and of Joab, undertaken by Solomon. The narrator convicts him of one murder only: that of Uriah, the first husband of Solomon's mother. Some of David's killings alibi him for other murders. Indeed, Joab's death also confirms David's alibis in three killings: it avenges not just the Saulide, Abner, and the rebel commander Amasa, but, implicitly, the rebel icon Absalom. However, the killings that might be described as elective are all tied up with Solomon. For the murder of Uriah, too, David attempts first to alibi his adultery, then to alibi the murder, but is found out by mantic means. For the executions of Shimei and Joab, he is vindicated by dint of personal inaction. Again, David kills for Solomon, only.

What is surprising here is that Solomon should have generated conciliatory

34. Hayim Tadmor, "Autobiographical Apology in the Royal Assyrian Literature," in Tadmor and Moshe Weinfeld, *History, Historiography and Interpretation*, 36-57, esp. 54-57. Tadmor is surely wrong, however, to entertain the possibility that the apology is a Davidic document, inasmuch as the exculpation of David for doing Saulides dirty continues through the Absalom revolt — to his decision to award half Mephibaal's estates to Ziba — and even into Solomon's reign, when that king finally gives both Joab and Shimei what for. See further below. The image of David projected in the apology — the image mainly of a victim — is not what David himself would have liked. Far more likely is Stefan Heym's intuition, in *The King David Report* (New York: Putnam, 1973), that the apology is Solomon's work. On the chronological issues, see Chapter 13.

35. A second alibi is furnished in 1 Sam. 21:11-15(12-16): the rumor that David had been a vassal of Achish of Gath was false!

apology. David spent his career, on the face of the presentation, hiding responsibility for his actions. He did not build a temple or an imposing capital. He did not murder his slain political opponents. All of 2 Samuel is his Broadway Alibi. David operated, at surface level, according to traditional restraints on the exercise of power. Solomon *projected* power through display, from the imposition of governors over districts of Israel to the press-gang construction of the temple and palace and of fortresses throughout the country. Solomon executed Adonijah for asking for possession of David's concubine Abishag. He confined Shimei, killing him on David's orders for violating his parole. He banished Abiathar. And, in a very significant episode, he condemned Joab for murdering Amasa and Abner.

This last action speaks volumes about the apology in 2 Samuel. David had told Solomon, the text claims, "You know what Joab did to the two officers of the armies of Israel, to Abner son of Ner and to Amasa son of Yeter, that he slew them and introduced the blood of war in *šālôm* ('in shalom,' 'in peace,' or 'in alliance'). . . . Don't send his grey head to hell in *šālôm*," i.e., peacefully (1 Kgs. 2:5-6).

The manner in which Solomon yields to his father's bidding is telling. Unlike David, Solomon does not initiate violence, but uses it as a weapon of justice in reaction to provocation — to restore balance. Joab, "who took the part of Adonijah, though he did not Absalom's" (1 Kgs. 2:28), dictates his own death even in the sanctuary of Yahweh's tent. Bidden by Benaiah to emerge, so that Benaiah can strike him down, Joab stymies his executioner, "No, I will die here" (1 Kgs. 2:30); "'Do as he says,' says the king. . . ." So Benaiah goes back and kills him (1 Kgs. 2:31-35).[36]

Abner's death in 2 Sam. 3 links directly to this text. Three times 2 Sam. 3 stresses that Abner was in *šālôm* with David (vv. 21-23). It also explicitly points out that it was because of a deed of Abner in battle, or war-time, the slaying of Asahel, that Joab and Abishai killed him. In other words, the "sons of Zeruiah" took vengeance inappropriately: they avenged a battlefield death in time of peace.[37] Because Joab had killed one with whom he was in alliance (harmony),

36. On the nature of Joab's death in the narrative, see Halpern, *The First Historians*, 146: "Solomon is passive even in carnage. . . ." Note that Exod. 21:14 provides for the removal of a homicide from refuge at an altar. This custom is not invoked in justification of Solomon's decision, whose justice thus depends wholly on Joab's unwitting consent. The law is later than David's time. See below, Chapter 22.

37. Peace may mean alliance here. These same texts present the solution to the problem of Huldah's oracle in 2 Kgs. 22:15-20 that Josiah would die "in peace": the exilic editor of Kings reports that Josiah fought Neco, who was assaulting the king of Assyria; the implication is that Josiah was Neco's ally, the opposite of the historical record, which was still

David later instructs Solomon: don't send his grey locks to Sheol in peace (harmony). Thus 1 Kgs. 2:5-6 very much pick up the thread of 2 Sam. 3, both explicitly and implicitly, contrasting killing in peace with killing in battle.

This connection, and the justification of Shimei's execution, make it clear that 2 Samuel was geared to conclude in the account of Solomon's reign. As related above, Solomon tells Shimei not to cross the eastern boundary of Jerusalem, in the direction of the Saulide center of Bahurim. When his slaves escape westward, to Gath, he goes to extradite them from King Achish. Solomon kills him for leaving the town at all.

It does not take much in the way of imagination to realize that the slaves' escape, and their choice of Gath as a refuge, are convenient for Solomon. The king of Gath is David's old sovereign, Achish, or less probably, a grandson named for him (1 Kgs. 2:39-40). Shimei's unimpeded journey to Gath indicates that relations remained warm, and that he expected extradition to be simple. The episode has the marks of staging, again, both the flight and the refuge having probably been arranged by Solomon. It would not be surprising, assuming that any slaves escaped at all, if Solomon killed them at the end of the tirade he directs at Shimei (1 Kgs. 2:41-46). In that case, Benaiah, Solomon's hatchet man, will silently have added two notches to his sword.

The account of Solomon's accession culminates in 1 Kgs. 5. Here, Hiram of Tyre, whose diplomatic mission marks David's "arrival" as a king, acknowledges Solomon's legitimacy. Solomon, or the author of his account, made Joab the chief agent for the violent deaths in David's reign. This alone does not imply the writing of 2 Samuel in the first years of Solomon's reign. But the framework of interpretation that the apology draws on was probably the child of that era.

Solomon could not execute David for these murders. His killing of Joab was partisan, since Joab backed the "usurper" Adonijah for the throne. But Solomon could present Joab's execution as that of the trigger-man for all those violent deaths and, paradigmatically, those of Abner and Amasa — north and south. Ridding himself at once of an adversary and of someone who could relate the truth about David, Solomon remade his father as the political victim of Joab and others, except where he, Solomon, was the beneficiary or agent of the

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known, e.g., to the Chronicler, to Herodotus, and to Josephus. The reason for the reversal in Kings is to infer an ironic fulfillment of Huldah's oracle: Josiah died at the hand of one with whom he was "at peace" — in alliance. See Baruch Halpern and David S. Vanderhooft, "The Editions of Kings in the 7th-6th Centuries B.C.E.," *HUCA* 62 (1991): 221-29; Halpern, "Why Manasseh Is Blamed for the Babylonian Exile: The Evolution of a Biblical Tradition," *VT* 48 (1998): 473-514.

murder. Solomon was the despot David dreamed of being, and his apology sheltered David from the reputation that his adversaries imposed on him — of the devious, rather than the put-upon, politician, whose enemies made a habit of waking up dead.

Why is Solomon, who settles old and new accounts draconically, concerned that David should not have done so? Why is he concerned with reconciliation when in year 24 of his reign, on the accession of Shishaq, he will pillage the north — sell the tribe of Asher — to secure the south?[38] The strategy of conciliation in the south, especially in the royal family — about the deaths of Absalom and Amasa — reflects a policy of co-option, of setting Judah apart, always a part of Solomon's administrative strategy. But central is the chronology: early in his reign, Solomon made Absalom's daughter the chief wife of Rehoboam, who would bear his successor.[39] Rehoboam was a child at the time, but the war wounds had not healed.

This is also why Rehoboam, son of an Ammonite princess, was made Solomon's heir: Ammonite collaboration was central to David's victory, and was a stick to the carrot of co-option for the north. The Solomonic schism, the secession of Israel from Judah now so vividly attested in the Tel Dan stela, was already on the horizon, and all the detail about the actors in Samuel reflects the early Solomon's policy of smoothing relations rather than the later policy of abandoning the north. Later, when Solomon had consolidated his hold on all the organs of the state, imposed his stamp from above on the Israelite landscape, the velvet glove could be doffed from the mailed fist. All this is explored in Chapter 22.

The point is, 2 Samuel is early, and very much in earnest — for after the loss of the north, and after the passage of years, much of its detail would surely have been omitted, as it was later in Chronicles. It concerns itself with accusations that David murdered his way to the throne, accusations not suddenly in-

38. Baruch Halpern, "Sectionalism and the Schism," *JBL* 93 (1974): 519-32. See below, Chapter 21.

39. Josephus *Ant.* 7.190: Rehoboam married Absalom's daughter. A Greek plus to 2 Sam. 14:27 is much the same. But in *Ant.* 8.249 Maacah, mother of Abijah, is the daughter not of Absalom himself but of Absalom's daughter Tamar. The adjustment probably arises because Kings reports the name of Asa's (queen-)mother as Maacah as well, and some source regarded this as a contradiction — that Rehoboam fathered Abijah by Maacah, then Abijah fathered Asa by her. In fact, it is more likely that Maacah continued in the role of queen-mother (not biological mother) after the brief reign of Abijah. But *Ant.* 8.249 is a brilliant harmonization! It probably stems from Josephus's *Vorlage*, as it doesn't appear already in the earlier treatment, just in the later. On the chronology of Rehoboam's marriage, see below, Chapter 13.

vented in a late period. Its portrait of Israel's struggle to unseat David is actuated by an intention to rally elites hostile to David to Solomon's side.[40] Second Samuel alibis David for his murders, and frames him for Uriah's death, which is the cause of Absalom's revolt. We know that Samuel is accurate because it is nothing but lies.

This conclusion brings us to the question of epistemology. The foregoing is a very textual overture to some historical issues. And that is the point. Historians, if they exercise their imagination at all — and history without imagination is dead history, or, to be explicit, is philology masquerading as history — can invert the obvious implications of textual data.

Sir Ronald Syme revolutionized the study of ancient Rome by taking the history of his subject from the Antonine, not Augustan, perspective.[41] The task of the ancient historian, of any historian, is in the end to recognize and reconstruct the cacophonous constructions of historical realities, the competing and merely alternative narratives, the possible alternative narratives that were or in some cases might have been pertinent to the historical agents, the human beings, involved in historical transactions. It is the historian's burden to elect his or her own narrative that includes, privileges, excludes, or repudiates elements of all those agents' voices.

History is not necessarily accurate, though it must strive to be accurate and correct in the proportions it ascribes to causal factors. Intentional disregard for evidence, intentional inaccuracy or imagination on the basis of no evidence, distinguishes romance, or historical fiction, or even fraudulent history, from real history. Thus, even though Theodor Mommsen's *Römische Geschichte* is shot through with judgments and allegations from which contemporary historians differ, it remains a work of history. Similarly, in the foregoing account, I have presented David as a serial murderer. Other scholars might differ, and might even attribute my own predilections to a contemporary Western obsession with serial killers.[42] Neither my own work nor such a riposte would fall outside the category of history, even though the two would be contradictory.

The text, like the artifact, encodes intention. But the intention of the text is to lead the reader in a particular direction. So contemplation of the alternative

40. See esp. Tomoo Ishida's studies, "Adonijah the Son of Haggith and His Supporters," in *The Future of Biblical Studies — the Hebrew Scriptures*, ed. Richard Elliott Friedman and H. G. M. Williamson (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), 165-87; "The Story of Abner's Murder: A Problem Posed by the Solomonic Apologist," *ErIsr* 23 (1993): 109*-13*.

41. Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (1939, repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 1.

42. See Philip Jenkins, *Using Murder: The Social Construction of Serial Homicide* (New York: de Gruyter, 1994), esp. 57-78.

possibilities demands that a historian invert the values and claims of the text and propose alternative scenarios, for which there is no other evidence. Epistemologically, history can be reduced almost to the level of philology, but oddly, what we know, what we really *know,* is the least interesting part of the field and the easiest to master. R. G. Collingwood even dismissively distinguishes the "chronicle" from the "history": the former is the Thomas Gradgrind "facts, facts, facts" reduction of all that is human in the latter. History is an art, and what is really important is what we can surmise, but never know. The preceding account admits of no archaeological verification whatever. But it furnishes a perspective unrepresented in our texts, and that is what history is for: done properly, it gives voice to those who do not speak in our texts, who have not left ideologically charged records, who have not successfully manipulated the technologies of persuasion at a temporal remove. Properly undertaken, the art of history is casting light into the dark. It is imagination based on evidence.

And imagination does advance our knowledge, as in other fields of scholarship. In the first instance, it is inconceivable that the alibis of Samuel could have been written much after David's day. A hundred years later, Amasa, Abner, Shimei would not only have been lost to living memory, but almost surely devoid of political resonance. The justification of Joab's execution would no longer have been necessary at all (and Chronicles omits the whole episode of Adonijah and its consequences). How do we know this? By imagining the concerns of the audience the text addresses.

Even in the reign of Rehoboam, one would expect an apology to exonerate Solomon totally. There would be no coup d'etat. There would also be no apology for the murders of northerners. These were, after all, beyond Rehoboam's borders, and those of all his successors.

Nor is it conceivable that the text is a later forgery, a satire meant to inspire suspicion that David was a serial killer. The linguistic and geographic data contradict the theory. And, in addition, no Near Eastern political tract exhibits such a subtle sensibility: as in the case of Uriah, an opponent of David would accuse him outright of having caused every death in the political realm during his career, and of being a Philistine agent throughout it. Both of these accusations would have rung true — the second is explored below, in Part V.

Nor is it remotely possible, as those who deny David's role in founding a Judahite dynasty in the 10th century would claim, that the text projected an imaginary dynasty founder back several centuries in time. We have ample documentation of how usurpers legitimated themselves in the ancient world. No new dynasty in the 8th century would have invented two centuries of very mottled prehistory, when the net result could only have been to make itself the ob-

ject of universal derision. The most common technique for justifying the seizure of power is to admit to usurpation, but then explain that a god elected a new king because one's predecessors were weak, sinful, or corrupt. This is exactly what Samuel does in claiming that Saul was unfit for Yahweh's charisma. To an extent 1 Kgs. 1–2 employ the same technique, in order to justify Solomon's military coup. But Kings and Samuel put the action in the 10th century, where the Tel Dan stela shows it must belong.

Indeed, the books of Kings get all sorts of foreign and indigenous figures in the right sequences, in the right places, at the right times. Starting in the 6th century with Jehoiachin and Nebuchadrezzar, we have external attestation of large numbers of Judahites and foreigners mentioned in Kings and Jeremiah. Among these are Neco, Gemaryahu son of Shaphan, Manasseh, Esarhaddon, Hezekiah, Sennacherib, Sargon, Ahaz, Shalmaneser V, Rezin of Damascus, Hoshea, Tiglath-Pileser III, Pekah, Menahem, Uzziah, Joash of Israel, Ben-Hadad son of Hazael, Jehu, Hazael, Mesha, probably Ahaziah of Judah and Jehoram of Israel, Ahab, Ittobaal of Tyre, Omri, Hadadezer (misremembered as Ben-Hadad, who is later), Shishaq, Hiram of Tyre, and now David. This is quite a list — all based on correlation to external sources — on its own. Since the Jerusalem temple was standing when Kings was written down, it is highly improbable that the authors of Kings got the builder's name wrong. Yet he was not the dynastic founder, David, attested at Tel Dan. This, of itself, is extraordinary, and is again not a feature that would characterize an invented history.

In the end, attacks on the reality of David are unrealistic. They demand a level of certainty — philological certainty — of which the epistemology of history is incapable in all times and at all places, for example, proof that Napoleon's tomb is a fraud and that the crowned heads of Europe together invented him as an excuse to mobilize armies and raise taxes, or that somebody invented our Solomon or our David — murderers both — in order to legitimate a dynasty that first raised its head in 8th-century Jerusalem. It is an error in historical work to hold in doctrinaire fashion with the detailed claims of texts, without attempting to understand the views of those not represented in them. And texts can err in their assumptions as well. But when it comes to a general assumption that the texts *share* with their audiences, an assumption of which they don't need to convince folks, then alternative possibilities have such a diminished probability that they hardly register as blips on the historical horizon. This is a problem of practical historical epistemology. Perhaps, in the end, it is like the bumblebee or the curve ball: it can't be done in theory, but it works just dandy, thanks. A text that addresses the sorts of accusations with which Samuel is concerned is perhaps the best evidence of David's activity, and of the nature of Israelite society at the time.

Was David the maniac that his opponents accused him of being? And if so, how did he succeed in becoming a nearly universal icon of piety, decorum, and success? In the next chapters, we will examine the texts relating to David's foreign wars, in an effort to reconstruct the exterior contours of his kingdom and in a further attempt to discern the technologies of history-writing that were put to use in the account of his life. At the end of that process, we shall stand in a somewhat better position to address the internal history of his reign.