13
David, King of Love

Introduction

For thousands of years, King David was an icon—and to some extent he still is today: the epitome of bravery and efficiency, wisdom and skill, artistry and piety. In more recent times, however, mounting attempts have been made to topple the icon from its pedestal, as it were. Novelists portray David as a loquacious, vain rooster or as a bloodthirsty tyrant.[1] Scholars think that he was—if he existed at all—at most a bandit leader of local importance, a mafia type, an unscrupulous serial killer.[2]

Today, it is a good thing when supposed superhumans are reduced to human dimensions, when high-flying myths are demythologized. However, apart from the fact that a historical sense of proportion must be maintained (which does not seem to be assured in some contemporary depictions of David), such attempts to reduce his larger-than-life image may miss the point. The Bible does occasionally show a tendency to heroize and exalt

1. Joseph Heller, *God Knows* (Knopf, 1984), or Grete Weil, *The Bride Price* (Godine, 1991); on these two novels and a third by Torgny Lindgren, see Walter Dietrich, "Gott, Macht und Liebe: Drei neue Romane über die Davidszeit," in *Von David zu den Deuteronomisten*, BWANT 156 (Kohlhammer, 2002), 113–19.

2. Doubts about David's existence are seen in a sentence such as "whether such a figure as the David of the Bible existed," expressed by Philip R. Davies in the introduction of the volume edited by him and Volkmar Fritz, *The Origins of the Ancient Israelite States*, JSOTSup 228 (Sheffield Academic, 1996), 15. See also Davies, "'House of David'—Built On Sand: The Sins of the Biblical Maximizers," *BAR* 20.4 (1994): 54–55. On David as a bandit leader, see Israel Finkelstein and Neil A. Silberman, *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of Western Tradition* (Free Press, 2006). On David as a killer, see Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Eerdmans, 2001); Steven L. McKenzie, *David: A Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

David, and deconstructing that is appropriate. On the whole, however, the Bible is surprisingly resistant to common ideologies of domination.[3] The David of the books of Samuel shows many weaknesses and makes many mistakes; the David of the Psalms presents himself primarily not as a victor but as a lamenter, petitioner, and penitent; the David of Chronicles is less a ruler than a saint, with only one goal in mind: the building of the temple in Jerusalem (which, as we know, was built by his son Solomon).

So it seems as if the biblical image of David calls less for dismantling of mythical power and more for an attempt to identify with him. Could the biblical (not necessarily the historical!) David not be an example for good leadership, for successful humanity? This question will be examined in the following on the basis of a leitmotif that one would not consider to be a priority either for a great ruler or for a minor potentate, but which plays a significant role in the biblical depiction of David: *love*.

In Hebrew, as in other languages,[4] this significant word scintillates with many nuances. There are three Hebrew roots, in particular, that express "love": אהב, נעם, and דוד, and all three are present in the texts of David. אהב (or the noun אהבה derived from it) can mean different things: Love between men and women, only between men (love of friends or homoeroticism?), from subordinates to the patron, the crowd for a hero, and also love of neighbor (Lev 19:18). The adjective נעים actually means "lovely" (e.g., a landscape; Ps 16:6); in the two places where it appears in the books of Samuel (2 Sam 1:23; 23:1), it describes the love between father and son[5] or that of a human being (David!) for art (2 Sam 23:1[6]). The verb נעם is used by David to indicate his relationship with Jonathan (2 Sam 1:26). דוד are the three radicals of the name "David." In the vocalization דּוֹד they mean "beloved, darling"; significantly, thirty of thirty-one references to this are in the Song of Songs, and the plural form דודים, "love," which appears six times there, also shows clear erotic connotations. However, דּוֹד also stands eighteen times for "uncle," the "favorite uncle," so to speak.[7]

3. See Walter Dietrich, "King David: Biblical Image of a Ruler in the Ancient Near Eastern Context," ch. 8 in this volume.

4. The Latin distinguishes *amor* and *sexus*, the Greek φιλία, ἔρως, and ἀγάπη. The German helps itself with epithets: love of friends, love of spouses, love for sale, love as charity, etc.

5. 2 Sam 1:23, in conjunction with אהב.

6. The passage in question could be translated as "lover of the songs of Israel."

7. In the inscription of the Moabite king Mesha from the ninth century, *dôd* seems

1. David, Beloved of God?

It is quite possible that the vocalization of the three consonants דוד with "a" and "i," which gives rise to the name "David," was created only artificially and to distinguish it from that other word called "darling." Perhaps David was actually called "Dôd"—for example, because his mother spontaneously called him "darling," "sweetheart" at birth, or because she consciously and with particular tenderness gave this name to her presumably last child.[8] Perhaps she also wanted to express that this child was or should be not only hers, but the darling of God, more precisely, of YHWH.[9]

In fact, according to the books of Samuel, God was very good to David throughout his life. From early on he looked upon him as king (see 1 Sam 15:28; 16:1–13), protected him from all manner of dangers, assisted him in numerous difficulties, responded to his requests and inquiries at all times and in a helpful manner, and stood by him steadfastly, even though there were occasional situations to rebuke or even punish him (2 Sam 12; 24).[10] Eight times a formula expressing the presence of YHWH (היה עם) is applied to David.[11] David's political successes are directly attributed to

---

to be an epithet of the God of Israel (line 12: "I brought from there the altar of their Dod"), which had the bizarre consequence that certain researchers, who did not want to believe that the so-called Tel Dan Stela (also from the ninth century) contained the phrase "house of David," read both words as "house of Dod," thus seeing in it the name of a YHWH shrine in Dan.

8. In ancient times, naming children was the right of the mother, not of the father (see for instance Gen 4:1; 30:4–24; 1 Sam 1:20; 4:21–22; 2 Sam 12:24 [*qere*]; also Exod 1:10). In the course of time this changed (see Hos 1:4, 6, 9; Isa 8:3; Job 42:12; Luke 1:13, etc.). According to 1 Sam 16:10, David had seven older brothers. In addition, there is (at least) one sister, Zeruiah, who in all probability was also older; for her sons, the "Sons of Zeruiah," appear to be David's comrades in arms and are therefore probably about the same age as him. Cf. the more detailed analysis by Steven L. McKenzie, "The Sons of Zeruiah," in *Seitenblicke: Literarische und historische Studien zu Nebenfiguren im zweiten Samuelbuch*, ed. Walter Dietrich, OBO 249 (Editions Universitaires; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 293–313.

9. It is highly probable that YHWH was the personal deity of the David family and thus became the dynasty god and finally the national god.

10. See his confession before the fight with Goliath, 1 Sam 17:37; his liaison with the Philistines, which was neither harmless nor safe; and his great good fortune not to have to go into battle with them against Saul and Israel (1 Sam 27–30). See also the only successful oracle inquiries in 1 Sam 23:1–13 and 2 Sam 5:17–25.

11. "YHWH was with David": 1 Sam 16:18; 17:37; 18:14, 28; 20:13; 2 Sam 8:6, 14;

the work of YHWH (e.g., 2 Sam 7:1, 9). In a severe crisis YHWH allegedly steered the course of events in David's favor (2 Sam 17:14). And unlike many kings, including some in the dynasty he founded, David finally died a peaceful death at a very old age.

So, the (biblical) story of David can certainly be read as that of a favorite of God. However, it is not said directly anywhere that God loved David. Solomon, on the other hand, was "loved" by God, as is noted immediately after the news of his birth (2 Sam 12:24). Later on, when David had seized power and (allegedly) led Israel to glory, God's enthusiasm for him seems to have waned. The Psalms speak of God's love in various ways, but never of the psalmist himself (who, as is well known, is often or even always David), but of certain values and the people who embody them: YHWH loves (אהב) "justice" (Ps 37:28), "righteousness" (Ps 45:8), "righteousness and justice" (Ps 33:5), "righteous deeds" (Ps 11:7), and, finally, "the righteous" (Ps 146:8).[12] In light of this, we should nuance any assumption of an exceptionally loving relationship of God with David.

2. David, Loved by People

In the passage describing the beginning of David's career at the court of Saul, *love* as a noun and as a verb is almost a guiding principle. Apart from the name of David, which of course occurs many times, the verb אהב appears seven times, and the noun אהבה three times.

It is interesting to see who is the subject and who the object of love. We will first take the clear cases: "And Jonathan loved him [David] as himself" (1 Sam 18:1). "And Michal loved David" (1 Sam 18:20, similar to 18:28).[13] "And all Israel loved David" (1 Sam 18:16). All these statements are in a single chapter. Earlier it was told how David had entered the service of the emotionally ill King Saul as a music therapist (1 Sam 16:14–23) and then

1 Kgs 1:37. On the distribution and possible background of the formula, see Horst Dietrich Preuß, "... Ich will mit dir sein," *ZAW* 80 (1968): 139–73.

12. Whether all these psalms are explicitly assigned to David (as is explicitly the case with three of them: Pss 11; 33; 37) does not play a decisive role; eventually David was associated with the entire book of Psalms.

13. In the exegetical literature it is regularly and rightly pointed out how unusual this statement is in the sociocultural context of the time. Apart from Michal, the only woman who appears as a lover throughout the Bible is the female protagonist in the Song of Songs.

defeated the Philistine Goliath (1 Sam 17). But now, in 1 Sam 18, the seed of suspicion and jealousy begins to grow in Saul; the king senses the rival in the young hero, "eyed" him (1 Sam 18:9) and finally becomes "enemy" to him (1 Sam 18:29).[14] One gets an idea of the significance of the placement at this juncture of the statements that others loved David—and not just any other, but Saul's eldest son and prospective heir to the throne Jonathan, his daughter Michal, and the people of Israel. The king's children and the king's people stand by the man whom the king considers his rival: a personally disastrous and politically precarious situation for a ruler!

However, there are also contrary signals in the texts that follow. Michal's liaison with David, we are told, fell apart. Jonathan and the soldiers of Israel stood side by side with Saul against the enemy of the country, the Philistines, until the bitter, tragic end.[15] With all these people, then, the love for David did not detract them from their loyalty to Saul. Perhaps one should understand this vacillating depiction as meaning that the people at that time had ambivalent feelings toward the two leaders of Israel, who were at odds with each other.[16]

This is in keeping with the fact that some of the statements made in the books of Samuel on the topic of David and love are strikingly ambiguous. When David (initially) succeeds with music therapy with Saul, 1 Sam 16:21 says, "And he loved him very much." Who loved whom: Saul loved David (as most people understand), or David loved Saul? From the syntax, both are possible. Why shouldn't a younger person be able to love an older person, a subject his king, a therapist his patient? Especially if the root אהב, as has been established in several special studies, can carry not only emotional but also political connotations: love as an expression of a subject's devotion to his master.[17] But the other is also conceivable, of course:

---

14. It is a strange coincidence that the Hebrew roots for "love" (אהב) and "enemy" (איב) differ only in one radical.

15. It is uncanny that David was a Philistine vassal at this time. But the biblical narrators put all their effort into proving that he was not present at the decisive battle.

16. On the concept of "ambivalence" in such a context, see Walter Dietrich, Kurt Lüscher, and Christoph Müller, eds., *Ambivalenzen erkennen, aushalten und gestalten: Eine neue interdisziplinäre Perspektive für theologisches und kirchliches Arbeiten* (TVZ, 2009), and therein especially the fundamental contribution of the sociologist Kurt Lüscher.

17. See J. A. Thompson, "The Significance of the Verb Love in the David-Jonathan Narratives in 1 Samuel," *VT* 24 (1974): 334–38; Susan Ackerman, "The Personal Is Political: Covenantal and Affectionate Love in the Hebrew Bible," *VT* 52 (2002):

that a king develops feelings of affection toward a particular subject, a sick person toward the therapist who is beneficial to him, an older, mature man toward a young man (in whatever sense). In my opinion, the issue does not have to be decided. Saul can love David and David can love Saul and both can love each other.

The same linguistic ambiguity characterizes the affection between Jonathan and David. In the forced farewell of the two friends, Jonathan "made David swear repeatedly"—up to this point the grammatical references are clear; but the sentence continues—"in his love for him, for he loved him as he loved himself" (1 Sam 20:17). Who loved whom as himself? A commentary states: "According to the context, David's love for Jonathan should be meant."[18] In fact, from a purely linguistic point of view, the phrase suggests that Jonathan made David swear by *his* love. However, it had never been said before that David loved Jonathan but (as quoted above) that "Jonathan loved David as himself" (1 Sam 18:1). Since 20:17 uses a very similar formulation, it could perhaps be about Jonathan's love for David, in which the latter is supposed to swear—expressed in a paraphrase: "You know how much I love you; so swear to me now." In an English commentary there is the wise remark: "given the reciprocal nature of true love, the ambiguity does not matter."[19] True: love is in most cases mutual. Those who wish to disparage David (and the tendency of some interpreters to do so was noted at the beginning), point out that in the first chapters about David's rise, only the love that others felt for him is reported, never his love for others; he is obviously incapable of love.[20] But, from a grammatical standpoint, that is less certain than those voices pretend to know. Apart from that, the narrator can emphasize the great popularity of David without simultaneously needing him to articulate his own feelings.[21]

437–58; Ellen van Wolde, "Sentiments as Culturally Constructed Emotions: Anger and Love in the Hebrew Bible," *BibInt* 16 (2008): 1–24.

18. Hans Joachim Stoebe, *Das erste Buch Samuelis*, KAT 13.1 (Mohn, 1973), 376.

19. A. Graeme Auld, *I and II Samuel*, OTL (Westminster John Knox, 2011), 242.

20. David E. Garland and Diana Garland interpret the silence of the narrator regarding David's emotions as follows: "Perhaps it had … to do with David loving himself too much to love anybody else." See David E. Garland and Diana Garland, *Flawed Families of the Bible: How God's Grace Works through Imperfect Relationships* (Brazos, 2007), 135. That David is prepared to "pay" for Michal with one hundred foreskins of Philistines is to be explained by his "macho pride."

21. Hayyim Angel rightly emphasizes that the ("love") relationships between David and the members of the Saul family need not be one-sided, they could—in all

Another somewhat ambiguous case deserves mention here. Saul wants to give David Michal, who loves him, as his wife—on the condition that his future son-in-law will provide one hundred Philistine foreskins as a bridal gift. (As we know, David subsequently doubled the number.) The introductory remark, "Behold, the king is pleased with you, and all his servants love you. And now: Become the king's son-in-law" (1 Sam 18:22), should have been proffered to David by negotiators. This message, mind you, comes from Saul, whom we know has long since been suspicious of David. Then why this compliment? Is this flattery? Or even poisonous? Should not אהב here be more about political relations than about emotions? If so, then Saul is assuring David of the loyalty of his own people—either with bitter sarcasm or as an expression of resigned insight.

One sees, according to the books of Samuel, that David was by no means everybody's darling. Rather, the leitmotif of love reveals a phenomenon that characterizes the David narrative in general: the ambiguity and occasional inscrutability of human characters and relationships. David, the supposedly universally beloved and favored, on closer inspection stands at the border between affection and aversion, selflessness and selfishness.

3. David, Lover of Men and Women

3.1. David and Jonathan

In his song of mourning for Saul and Jonathan, who fell against the Philistines, David finds touching words, especially for his dead friend: "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; you have been very dear to me [נעם]. Your love was more precious to me than the love of women [twice אהבה]" (2 Sam 1:26). This is the usual translation. However, the Hebrew text also allows the genitive to be understood not as *genitivus possesivus* but as *genitivus obiectivus*. Then the translation would be: "More delightful to me was the love for you than the love for women." Here again appears the ambiguity noted above: David could have been the object, but he also could have been the subject of love. Perhaps one should hear both. Accordingly, one can also think of the statement "you have been

three cases!—also have been mutual. See Hayyim Angel, "When Love and Politics Mix: David and His Relationships with Saul, Jonathan, and Michal," *JBQ* 40 (2012): 41–51. But in love relationships the Bible often describes only the respective "dominant" side as actively loving (see, e.g., Gen 25:28; 29:18).

dear to me" with different reasons: "because of your love for me" or "because of my love for you"—and as the third reason again: "because of our mutual love."

The deep sadness expressed in this song shows that David also felt love for Jonathan, not just Jonathan for David. When the two of them had to separate as a result of Saul's hostility toward David, they are said to have fallen into each other's arms to say goodbye, they "kissed" (each other) and (both) "wept" (1 Sam 20:41).

Western exegesis has long understood the relationship between David and Jonathan as an extraordinary, wonderful friendship between men or between young people. It is hardly surprising that it has recently been viewed from the perspective of same-sex love. After all, the ancient world knows famous male couples: Gilgamesh and Enkidu in Babylon, Achilles and Patroclus in Hellas—so why not David and Jonathan in Israel? According to some, the texts clearly indicate this.[22] Others counter that love between men had a clear negative connotation in Israel, so that such a thing would not have been attached to the heroes David and Jonathan.[23] The discussion is fierce, sometimes bitter.[24] Must it be decided? Is it not possible to conclude that the interpretation of homosexuality is not probable, that the interpretation of homoeroticism is possible—and neither is absolutely necessary?[25]

The poem "David and Jonathan" by Else Lasker-Schüler (1869–1945) offers a touching example of a way of speaking that is ambiguous in this sense and does not exclude any interpretation:

---

22. E.g., Tom Horner, *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times* (Westminster, 1978). Also Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli, "Saul, David und Jonathan—eine Dreiecksgeschichte? Ein Beitrag zum Thema 'Homosexualität im Ersten Testament,'" *BK* 51 (1996): 15–22. Karin Hügel's 2022 Amsterdam dissertation, "Queere Lesarten der Hebräischen Bibel" (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368880240_Karin_Hugel_PhD_thesis) seems to be a clear vote in this direction. The dissertation is scheduled (release date: November 2025) to be published as number 235 in Brill's Biblical Interpretation series.

23. Markus Zehnder, "Exegetic Observations on the David Jonathan Stories," *Bib* 79 (1998): 153–79.

24. There are also nuances, for example in Martti Nissinen, "The Love of David and Jonathan as a Question of Modern Exegesis," *Bib* 80 (1999): 250–63.

25. It should again be noted that also the initial relationship between Saul and David according to 1 Sam 16:21 was marked by love; there, too, homoeroticism could be in play.

We are written in the bible
Brightly entwined.

But we still play our boyish games
Upon a star.

I am David,
You my playmate,

Oh how we painted
Our white ram's hearts red!

Like buds with love-psalms,
Beneath a festive sky.

But your farewell eyes—
You always kiss me silently.

And what is left for your heart
Without mine—

For your sweet nights
Without my songs.

3.2. David and the Women

Whatever one thinks of the alleged homosexuality of David, that he was heterosexually active is beyond question. The listing of seventeen sons he had with many different women alone proves this.[26] Such reports do not contain any evaluation. They can be read as an expression of the virility and potency of a strong ruler. However, later, the Bible will see in the hundreds of wives and concubines of Solomon an expression of excess and a gateway to infidelity to YHWH.[27]

---

26. See 2 Sam 3:2–5; 5:14–16; according to these lists, David fathered six sons in Hebron and eleven in Jerusalem. In 5:13 there is also talk of daughters, but they are not mentioned by name.

27. See 1 Kgs 11:1–8 and the prejudgment in Deut 17:17; on this, see "History and Law: Deuteronomistic Historiography and Deuteronomic Law Exemplified in the Transition from the Period of the Judges to the Monarchical Period," ch. 4 in this volume.

In contrast to Solomon, where the biblical narrators provide general statements about these matters, with David they describe four individual female relationships in greater detail. Only very cautiously do they reveal something like love—not surprising in itself, since this expectation is largely due to modern sensibilities. More astonishing is that twice Michal is explicitly said to have been in love with David—but nothing is said about his love for her. Some conclude that he did not love her so much as use her as a vehicle for his own ascent. After all, when he had the power to do so, he brought her back to himself after he had lost her to another man because of Saul's hostility (2 Sam 3:12–16). This, too, can be interpreted to his detriment: he merely wanted to underline his claim to the throne with the king's daughter. But it could just as well have been love and loyalty that made him act this way; the narrators remain silent about the motives. In the end, the two of them have a falling out (2 Sam 6:16, 20–23). Was this an expression of mutual alienation or disappointed expectations? Again, there is much room for interpretation.[28]

The second woman mentioned, and how she came to David's side (and apparently stayed there), is Abigail, the wife or widow of a rich cattle rancher in the Negev.[29] She saved herself and her husband's lives from a vendetta by David, who was then a freebooter. When her husband died, she offered herself to David as a wife, and he agreed. Certainly, he was moved to do so by her many possessions and her social standing in the Calebite clan, in addition to the fact that she was supposedly beautiful and intelligent. There is no mention of love between them anywhere. It seems to be the typical case of a politico-economically justified marriage of convenience, as kings have always conducted.[30]

His liaison with Bathsheba is generally regarded as the great love story in David's life. It began with the sexual lust of the king and adultery

28. On the figure of Michal, see David J. A. Clines and Tamara C. Eskenazi, eds., *Telling Queen Michal's Story: An Experiment in Comparative Interpretation*, JSOTSup 119 (Sheffield Academic, 1991); Ina Willi-Plein, "Michal und die Anfänge des Königtums in Israel," in Willi-Plein, *Sprache als Schlüssel: Gesammelte Aufsätze zum Alten Testament* (Neukirchener Verlag, 2002), 79–96.

29. 1 Sam 25. In 2 Sam 3:3, she is mentioned as the mother of a son of David named Kilab. According to 2 Sam 6:23, Michal had no children by David. See Melanie Peetz, *Abigajil, die Prophetin: Mit Klugheit und Schönheit für Gewaltverzicht: Eine exegetische Untersuchung zu 1Sam 25*, FB 116 (Echter, 2008).

30. See Jon D. Levenson, "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History," *CBQ* 40 (1978): 11–28.

that led to the murder of her husband. Bathsheba's feelings toward David are not mentioned anywhere. It has been assumed that by bathing in his sight she calculatingly offered herself to him. She had sex with the king and wanted to have a child with him, and it is no coincidence that her son Solomon became David's successor.[31] Feminist-oriented exegetes, on the other hand, have argued that this was the rape of a defenseless woman by a king who disregarded rights and customs.[32] In my opinion, the better argument is the latter. It is possible that Solomon's elevation to the throne meant something like satisfaction for Bathsheba for the humiliation she once suffered. David allegedly agreed to this decision. Why? Out of political reasons, out of old age—or out of weakness for this woman? She is the only person of the female sex for whom the biblical narrators reveal something like David's emotional affection.[33] When she was pregnant and her husband dead, he did not need to bring her to his court with the full rights of a royal wife. He would not have had to fight for her firstborn child, who suddenly fell ill, as if it were his only son. He would not have had to feel pity for her and comfort her when the child died.[34] And he would not have had to make her second child, Solomon, his successor in the end.

The fourth woman who appears as an individual in the stories of David is Abishag of Shunem (1 Kgs 1:1–4), a beautiful girl who was brought in to bed with the king, who was trembling with age and cold, in the hope that she would "warm" him. But laconically the text reports, "And the king did not know her." No more is said about the relationship between these two.

---

31. Georg G. Nicol, "The Alleged Rape of Bathsheba: Some Observations on Ambiguity in Biblical Narrative," *JSOT* 73 (1997): 43–54.

32. Cheryl J. Exum, "Bathsheba Plotted, Shot, and Painted," *Semeia* 74 (1996): 47–73. The discussion is reported and evaluated by Thomas Naumann, "David und die Liebe," in *König David, biblische Schlüsselfigur und europäische Leitgestalt*, ed. Walter Dietrich and Hubert Herkommer (Universitätsverlag; Kohlhammer, 2003), 68–72.

33. According to the psychoanalyst Hans-Jürgen Dallmeyer, (the literary!) Bathsheba has awakened in David the "anima personality side" that he had kept closed to himself until then; see Hans-Jürgen Dallmeyer and Walter Dietrich, *David—ein Königsweg: Psychoanalytisch-theologischer Dialog* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 177–78.

34. See, however, the critical considerations of David Bosworth, "'David Comforted Bathsheba' (2Sam 12:24): Gender and Parental Bereavement," in Dietrich, *Seitenblicke*, 238–55.

3.3. David and His Sons

David's love is expressly mentioned in another context. Apparently, he loved his children, especially his sons—almost too much. This is reported in detail regarding two of them: his eldest, Amnon, and the second eldest, Absalom. These two were connected through the relationship with Tamar, Absalom's full sister and Amnon's half-sister. Amnon falls in love with her,[35] covets her, and eventually rapes her. After learning of it, David reacts to the incident in no less than three ways, depending on which version of the text one follows.[36] The shortest version is the Masoretic Text: "And he was very angry" (2 Sam 13:21). This remark refutes the suspicion of tacit complicity; after all, the scandal between David and Bathsheba had just preceded it, so some might well think that the father had too much understanding, or even empathy, with the son. But no, it was not like that. David was angry with Amnon (for whatever reasons), but he did nothing further. The version from Qumran (4QSam[a]) gives a reason for this: "For he was his firstborn." That makes sense: The king is sparing the crown prince so as not to endanger the succession. The Greek Septuagint is even more detailed: "And he was very angry with him. But he did not offend the spirit of his son Amnon; for *he loved him*[37] because he was his firstborn." It was fatherly love, therefore, that caused David to do nothing. The consequence was that Absalom had Amnon murdered.

David also shows a weakness born of love that leads to nothing good to his second son.[38] After fratricide, Absalom flees into exile, fights his way back to the king's environs after a few years, immediately acts as heir to the throne, and soon begins preparations for an uprising that will sweep his father from the throne and almost cost him his head. Although the son acts and agitates directly under the eyes of the king, he does not hinder him. Finally, David must flee Jerusalem to escape the growing rebellion, but in the end his mercenaries defeat the cohort around Absalom, and General

35. To this the word אהב is applied in 2 Sam 13:1.

36. For the following, see "David, Amnon, and Absalom (2 Sam 13): Literary, Textual, and Historical Considerations on the Ambivalent Relations between a Father and His Sons," ch. 11 in this volume.

37. In the Hebrew original, the verb אהב was certainly used here.

38. About him, see Charles Conroy, *Absalom, Absalom! Narrative and Language in 2 Sam 13–20*, 2nd ed., AnBib 81 (Biblical Institute Press, 2006); Thomas Naumann, "Abschalom—Apekte eines literarischen Porträts," in Dietrich, *Seitenblicke*, 314–30.

Joab puts an end to his life with his own hands. David then falls into a deep mourning—much to the displeasure of Joab, who reproaches him: "You love those who hate you, and you hate those who love you" (2 Sam 19:6–7). That is to say, "Absalom, who sought to kill you, you have a foolish love for him; but with those (among others me) who have saved your life from this murderous son, you are distraught." When Joab threatens the king with the defection of his loyal soldiers, David pulls himself together and inspects the troops as they pass over. Soon he returns to Jerusalem, grows older and older, experiences another attempt at arbitrary succession by his third son, Adonijah, and, finally, helps the tenth son, Solomon, to the throne (1 Kgs 1–2). Not all is well that ends well.

David's love for Absalom was reflected vividly by the poet Kurt Oskar Buchner (1912–1994) in his poem "David in the Night after Absalom's Death." In it the father-son relationship comes to light—and in a way more critical of the son than sons may like to hear (and as simple Bible readers hear the text).[39]

Did you mean the father or the king alone,
Absalom?
You knew full well that he would be helpless;
you knew that even when you were young and small
and trampled my love underfoot.
I often told you that what is mine is yours
and asked for your trust,
Absalom!

But I saw your mouth, so proud and hard,
Absalom,
and saw your eyes, which I adored,
even though I sensed how cold and frozen
you remained toward me.
I did not want to believe what awaited me;
I wanted only to love you blindly,
Absalom!

But you only laughed at my helplessness,
Absalom,
and deliberately drove it so far

39. This is my translation of "David in der Nacht nach Absaloms Tod."

that I obeyed God and the oath
and ordered that the traitor be judged.
And my heart was torn apart at that time,
for love cannot renounce,
Absalom!

And now you are dead, for I did my duty,
Absalom,
and every day is a new judgment for me,
and I see every feature of your face
and still hear you laughing.
I cry out to God, but he does not answer,
so I will watch over you,
Absalom!

David loved many: women and men. He was driven by sexual greed and cool calculation, but also by friendship, caring, and fatherliness. But hardly was he ever lucky with love. Some love bonds remained strangely weak and untrained, others were violently torn apart, and still others led into desolate abysses. Before the eyes of the reader the picture of a man arises, who was capable of love, but for whom happiness in love was only temporary and imperfect.

4. David, Lover of Art

From the history of art there are countless illustrations of David with the harp (or lyre, psaltery, organon, flute, fiddle, etc.),[40] whether it is together with other psalmists[41] or alone, with or without an audience. In these illustrations mostly people listen to him, preferably Bathsheba, but sometimes also animals.[42] This rich iconography made David the epitome of the artist on the throne.[43]

40. Rich impressions of this are given by Walter Salmen, "Die Vielzahl der Attribute des musizierenden und 'springenden' David," in Dietrich and Herkommer, *König David*, 687–729.

41. As only one example from early medieval art history, a Milanese Psalter from the ninth century showing David in the circle of Asaph, Heman, Etan, and Jeduthun may be mentioned, illustrated by Therese Bruggisser-Lanker, "König David und die Macht der Musik," in Dietrich and Herkommer, *König David*, 603.

42. Here the Orpheus motif has a strong impact on the David tradition; see

According to the history of tradition, and possibly also history, this motif originated in a story which has David hired at Saul's court as a lyre player to drive away the evil spirit that sporadically attacked the king.[44] But David appears in the books of Samuel not only as a sound artist, but also as a word artist; two poems—allegedly (and probably really) created by him to lament for members of the royal household who have died—are quoted in the text (2 Sam 1:19–27; 3:33–34). The appendix to the books of Samuel includes two psalm poems attributed to David.[45] The second of them bears the somewhat baroque title: "These are the last words of David. Oracle of David the son of Jesse, oracle of the man who was highly exalted, the anointed of the God of Jacob and the favorite [נעים] of the songs of Israel." With this David is characterized as *the* Hebrew poet.

As such he then appears extensively in the Psalter. In the Hebrew Bible, seventy-three psalms bear the name "David" in their headings. (In the Greek Bible there are over eighty; in Qumran all the Psalms and many more songs.) The Hebrew phrase לדוד does not necessarily mean "of David" (as the Bible translations mostly reflect).[46] The so-called ל *auctoris* is even comparatively rare; actually, the preposition ל initially only says "in relation to." Accordingly, the songs and prayers in question should be read and spoken with David in mind, in remembrance of him; their meaning and message should be illustrated by the David narratives in the books of Samuel.

Walter Dietrich, *David: Der Herrscher mit der Harfe*, 2nd ed., Biblische Gestalten 14 (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016), 277–83.

43. An extremely rare ancient Near Eastern analogy to this is presented by King Shulgi of Ur (twenty-first century BCE), who says of himself that he has dedicated himself to music and that nothing that has to do with music is too difficult for him; see Giorgio Castellino, *Two Šulgi Hymns*, Studi Semitici 42 (Istituto di studi del Vicino Oriente, 1972), 47. It should be noted that even in modern times the number of artistically gifted regents is quite limited; figures such as Frederick the Great or Helmut Schmidt are the exceptions, not the rule.

44. 1 Sam 16:14–23; see Walter Dietrich, *Samuel: 1Samuel 13–26*, BKAT 8.2 (Neukirchener Verlag, 2015), 248–88.

45. 2 Sam 22 = Ps 18; 2 Sam 23:1–7; see Martin Kleer, *"Der liebliche Sänger der Psalmen Israels": Untersuchungen zu David als Dichter und Beter der Psalmen*, BBB 108 (Philo, 1996), 11–77; Hans-Peter Mathys, *Dichter und Beter: Theologen aus spätalttestamentlicher Zeit*, OBO 132 (Universitätsverlag; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), 146–64.

46. See Kleer, *"Der liebliche Sänger,"* 78–86.

The relationship between the Psalms and the books of Samuel is intensified in thirteen psalms by explicitly associating them with a particular situation in David's life:

Ps 3—2 Sam 15
Ps 7—2 Sam 16:5–13?; 18:31–32?
Ps 18—2 Sam 7:1
Ps 34—1 Sam 21:11–16
Ps 51—2 Sam 12
Ps 52—1 Sam 21:8; 22:9–10
Ps 54—1 Sam 23:19–20
Ps 56—1 Sam 21:11–16
Ps 57—1 Sam 22:1
Ps 59—1 Sam 19:11
Ps 60—2 Sam 8:3–8, 13–14 (1 Kgs 11:15–16)
Ps 63—1 Sam 22:5; 23:14
Ps 142—1 Sam 22:1

The situations in David's life that are addressed here are predominantly those of persecution. Accordingly, the psalms in question are predominantly lamentation songs. In fact, David is surprisingly often described in the books of Samuel as threatened and endangered.[47] This made it possible for him to become a figure with whom people in need could identify. Whoever is suffering should know that David also suffered. On the other hand, we know that David led a long, successful, God-filled life. Since the name of David is also associated with songs of trust (e.g., Pss 11; 23), thanksgiving (e.g., Pss 27; 40; 118, admittedly without "David" in the title), and victory (Pss 18; 20; 21; in a certain way also Pss 2; 110), and since, moreover, every lament also contains statements of hope and trust, indeed of the praise of God, anyone who prays in memory of David can hope that God will be with him or her as God was with David.

In his own way, the Chronicler has erected a monument to the psalmist David. He reports that, before David handed over the rule to Solomon, the temple builder, he first organized the temple singing and assigned the guilds of temple singers. The names of the heads of the families—Asaph,

47. See the thorough investigation into this by Sara Kipfer, *Der bedrohte David: Eine exegetische und rezeptionsgeschichtliche Studie zu 1 Sam 16–1 Kön 2*, Studies of the Bible and Its Reception 3 (De Gruyter, 2015).

Heman, Jeduthun—are also found in the Psalms.[48] Shortly before his death, David was engaged in a solemn assembly as a prayer leader and chorister: a legacy of a very special kind (1 Chr 29:10–20).

5. David, Lover of God and People

In the Psalms something comes to light that does not appear in the books of Samuel: David's love for God. In Ps 31:23, "he"[49] calls on his fellow believers: "Love (אהב) YHWH!" Only one who is himself in love can call for this. Indeed, in Ps 116:1 we find the exuberant confession: "I love (אהב) YHWH!"[50] Even if this psalm is not explicitly assigned to David, sooner or later people heard him speak in it.

The David of Psalms loves not only God but also "the place of [God's] house" (Ps 26:8). According to Ps 99:4, it is "the strength of the king" that he loves [אהב] YHWH's "justice." And the longest psalm (Ps 119) invokes the pious man's "love" for God's torah, commandments, and the like ten times. This, too, can be heard as the speech of the exemplary piety of David.

The books of Samuel speak cautiously and never quite clearly about David's love for God, as well as his love for people.[51] In contrast to this, the person praying the Ps 109—the title of which reads לדוד—confesses his "love" (אהבה) for his fellow humans, regardless of the fact that this conduct has been rewarded with hatred (Ps 109:4, 5).[52] If one wishes, one can see a connection to Saul and, above all, to Absalom. The evidence of the love of the psalmist David for God and for humanity is not abundant,[53] but

48. Asaph: Pss 50; 73–83; Heman: Ps 88; Jeduthun: Pss 39; 62; 77. The Korahites (Pss 42; 44–49; 84–85; 87–88) as well as Ethan (Ps 89), who are prominently represented in the Psalter, are missing, however.

49. Ps 31 carries the heading לדוד.

50. The Hebrew text offers the sequence of words: "I love because he hears, YHWH." *BHS* proposes to change the wording to "I love YHWH, because he hears [or has heard]."

51. See section 3 above.

52. In Ps 109:17, the verb is still encountered—but for its opponent: the enemy of the psalmist "loves" the curse.

53. The further evidence for אהב in the Psalms does not bear any weight for our theme: Ps 4:3: One should not love the vain; Ps 52:5–6: Doeg (David's betrayer; see 1 Sam 22) loves the lie; Ps 34:13: "Who loves to see good days?"; Ps 47:5: YHWH loves Jacob (= Israel); Ps 78:68 and Ps 87:2: YHWH loves Zion.

it is significant. It completes the picture of David by emphasizing an aspect that remains vague in the books of Samuel (and in Chronicles).

Conclusion

This essay began with the question whether the biblical David could be an example worthy of reflection or even emulation. The examination of the leitmotif love allows us to answer this question in the affirmative. The decisive factor is that the biblical authors do not paint a propagandistic picture of David that is unbelievably brilliant. The figure of David is not all golden, not even as the "king of love." Nowhere is it explicitly said that God loved him, and his love for God is not mentioned until the Psalms. Although the relationship between YHWH and David as a whole is undoubtedly close and by far predominantly positive, there remains in the end a distance between them; the king does not become at one with God, and God is not bound unconditionally to the king. It is similar with David's love for and being loved by humans: he is capable of love, at times loving, and yet at times he seems to have too little love, and at other times too much. Hardly any of his love relationships can be called happy. Especially at the beginning of his career he meets with a lot of sympathy and love, but the reasons are not always clear and often the outcome is tragic. Maybe the fewest shadows fall on him as a lover of art. That is why David is remembered by posterity not least as a musician, singer, and praying man. The psalms attributed to him invite us to identify with a man who has often suffered but also triumphed again and again. From the Psalms, our gaze is drawn back to the books of Samuel and their image of a man who, though significant, is not beyond human measure, and who is not perfect in love, but who nevertheless loves and is loved.

Bibliography

Ackerman, Susan. "The Personal Is Political: Covenantal and Affectionate Love in the Hebrew Bible." *VT* 52 (2002): 437–58.

Angel, Hayyim. "When Love and Politics Mix: David and His Relationships with Saul, Jonathan, and Michal." *JBQ* 40 (2012): 41–51.

Auld, A. Graeme. *I and II Samuel*. OTL. Westminster John Knox, 2011.

Bosworth, David. "'David Comforted Bathsheba' (2Sam 12:24): Gender and Parental Bereavement." Pages 238–55 in *Seitenblicke: Literarische und historische Studien zu Nebenfiguren im zweiten Samuelbuch*.

Edited by Walter Dietrich. OBO 249. Academic Press; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011.

Bruggisser-Lanker, Therese. "König David und die Macht der Musik." Pages 589–629 in *König David—biblische Schlüsselfigur und europäische Leitgestalt*. Edited by Walter Dietrich and Hubert Herkommer. Academic Press; Kohlhammer, 2003.

Castellino, Giorgio. *Two Šulgi Hymns*. Studi Semitici 42. Istituto di studi del Vicino Oriente, 1972.

Clines, David J. A., and Tamara C. Eskenazi, eds. *Telling Queen Michal's Story: An Experiment in Comparative Interpretation*. JSOTSup 119. Sheffield Academic, 1991.

Conroy, Charles. *Absalom, Absalom! Narrative and Language in 2 Sam 13–20*. 2nd ed. AnBib 81. Biblical Institute Press, 2006.

Dallmeyer, Hans-Jürgen, and Walter Dietrich. *David—ein Königsweg: Psychoanalytisch-theologischer Dialog*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003.

Davies, Philip R. "'House of David'—Built On Sand: The Sins of the Biblical Maximizers." *BAR* 20.4 (1994): 54–55.

Dietrich, Walter. *David: Der Herrscher mit der Harfe*. 2nd ed. Biblische Gestalten 14. Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016.

———. "Gott, Macht und Liebe: Drei neue Romane über die Davidszeit." Pages 113–19 in *Von David zu den Deuteronomisten*. BWANT 156. Kohlhammer, 2002.

———. *Samuel: 1Samuel 13–26*. BKAT 8.2. Neukirchener Verlag, 2015.

Dietrich, Walter, Kurt Lüscher, and Christoph Müller, eds. *Ambivalenzen erkennen, aushalten und gestalten: Eine neue interdisziplinäre Perspektive für theologisches und kirchliches Arbeiten*. TVZ, 2009.

Exum, Cheryl J. "Bathsheba Plotted, Shot, and Painted." *Semeia* 74 (1996): 47–73.

Finkelstein, Israel, and Neil A. Silberman. *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of Western Tradition*. Free Press, 2006.

Fritz, Volkmar. *The Origins of the Ancient Israelite States*. JSOTSup 228. Sheffield Academic, 1996.

Garland, David E., and Diana Garland. *Flawed Families of the Bible: How God's Grace Works through Imperfect Relationships*. Brazos, 2007.

Halpern, Baruch. *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King*. Eerdmans, 2001.

Heller, Joseph. *God Knows*. Knopf, 1984.

Horner, Tom. *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times*. Westminster, 1978.

Hügel, Karin. "Queere Lesarten der Hebräischen Bibel." PhD diss. Amsterdam, 2022.

Kipfer, Sara. *Der bedrohte David: Eine exegetische und rezeptionsgeschichtliche Studie zu 1 Sam 16–1 Kön 2*. Studies of the Bible and Its Reception 3. De Gruyter, 2015.

Kleer, Martin. *"Der liebliche Sänger der Psalmen Israels": Untersuchungen zu David als Dichter und Beter der Psalmen*. BBB 108. Philo, 1996.

Levenson, Jon D. "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History." *CBQ* 40 (1978): 11–28.

Mathys, Hans-Peter. *Dichter und Beter: Theologen aus spätalttestamentlicher Zeit*. OBO 132. Universitätsverlag; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994.

McKenzie, Steven L. *David: A Biography*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

———. "The Sons of Zeruiah." Pages 293–313 in *Seitenblicke: Literarische und historische Studien zu Nebenfiguren im zweiten Samuelbuch*. Edited by Walter Dietrich. OBO 249. Editions Universitaires; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011.

Naumann, Thomas. "Abschalom—Apekte eines literarischen Porträts." Pages 314–30 in *Seitenblicke: Literarische und historische Studien zu Nebenfiguren im zweiten Samuelbuch*. Edited by Walter Dietrich. OBO 249. Editions Universitaires; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011.

———. "David und die Liebe." Pages 51–84 in *König David, biblische Schlüsselfigur und europäische Leitgestalt*. Edited by Walter Dietrich and Hubert Herkommer. Universitätsverlag; Kohlhammer, 2003.

Nicol, Georg G. "The Alleged Rape of Bathsheba: Some Observations on Ambiguity in Biblical Narrative." *JSOT* 73 (1997): 43–54.

Nissinen, Martti. "The Love of David and Jonathan as a Question of Modern Exegesis." *Bib* 80 (1999): 250–63.

Peetz, Melanie. *Abigajil, die Prophetin: Mit Klugheit und Schönheit für Gewaltverzicht: Eine exegetische Untersuchung zu 1Sam 25*. FB 116. Echter, 2008.

Preuß, Horst Dietrich. "... Ich will mit dir sein." *ZAW* 80 (1968): 139–73.

Salmen, Walter. "Die Vielzahl der Attribute des musizierenden und 'springenden' David." Pages 687–729 in *König David, biblische Schlüsselfigur und europäische Leitgestalt*. Edited by Walter Dietrich and Hubert Herkommer. Universitätsverlag; Kohlhammer, 2003.

Schroer, Silvia, and Thomas Staubli. "Saul, David und Jonathan—eine Dreiecksgeschichte? Ein Beitrag zum Thema 'Homosexualität im Ersten Testament.'" *BK* 51 (1996): 15–22.

Stoebe, Hans Joachim. *Das erste Buch Samuelis*. KAT 13.1. Mohn, 1973.

Thompson, J. A. "The Significance of the Verb Love in the David-Jonathan Narratives in 1 Samuel." *VT* 24 (1974): 334–38.

Weil, Grete. *The Bride Price*. Godine, 1991.

Willi-Plein, Ina. "Michal und die Anfänge des Königtums in Israel." Pages 79–96 in *Sprache als Schlüssel: Gesammelte Aufsätze zum Alten Testament*. By Ina Willi-Plein. Neukirchener Verlag, 2002.

Wolde, Ellen van. "Sentiments as Culturally Constructed Emotions: Anger and Love in the Hebrew Bible." *BibInt* 16 (2008): 1–24.

Zehnder, Markus. "Exegetic Observations on the David Jonathan Stories." *Bib* 79 (1998): 153–79.