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David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible*

There are three sets of questions underlying this study.

1. What does it mean to be a man in our own culture? What roles are available for young men to grow into, what images are there for adult men to imitate, what criteria exist for defining manliness?

2. And what was it like in the world of the Bible? Was it different, or much the same?

3. How do our answers to the first set of questions determine or influence our answers to the second set? How have our images of biblical men been shaped by our own cultural norms?

1. *Being a Man in the Modern West*

In the predominant culture of the West, five major themes in the construction of masculinity have been noted in one influential analysis.¹

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¹. The typology is that of J.A. Doyle, *The Male Experience* (Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown, 2nd edn, 1989), cited by Julia T. Wood, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1994), pp. 77-81. See also Joseph H. Pleck, *The Myth of Masculinity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981).

1. The primary rule is: Don't be female. J.A. Doyle calls this the 'negative touchstone' of men's role. Whatever women do is *ipso facto* what a real man must not do.²

2. The second rule is: Be successful. Men are trained to be 'success objects',³ and their worth as husbands, friends and simply as men is determined by their successfulness. 'The object, a boy soon gathers, is not to be liked but to be envied, ... not to be part of a group but to distinguish himself from the others in the

There are other important dimensions to the study of masculinity of which this essay cannot, of necessity, take account. One is that of *change* in western masculinity, and of the processes by which the prevailing norms have developed. See, for example, *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800* (ed. Michael Roper and John Tosh; London: Routledge, 1991); *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America 1800-1940* (ed. J.A. Mangan and James Walvin; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); Clyde W. Franklin, II, *The Changing Definition of Masculinity* (New York: Plenum Press, 1984); Michael S. Kimmel, *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987). Cf. also the reviews introduced by Michael Roper, 'Recent Books on Masculinity', *History Workshop* 29 (1990), pp. 184-93; and the review forum in *Victorian Studies* 36 (1993), pp. 207-26; James Eli Adams, 'The Banality of Transgression? Recent Works on Masculinity' (pp. 207-13); Ed Cohen, 'Mar(r)king Men' (pp. 215-210); Mary Poovey, 'Exploring Masculinities' (pp. 223-26).

Another significant dimension is *theorizing* masculinity; see especially Peter Middleton, *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992); and *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism* (ed. Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden; London: Routledge, 1990).

A third dimension is the challenge to the concept of masculinity itself posed by a *deconstructive* approach to the opposition male/female. See especially Jeff Hearn, *Men in the Public Eye: The Construction and Deconstruction of Public Men and Public Patriarchies* (London: Routledge, 1992), esp. pp. 1-9.

². Cf. Arthur Brittan, *Masculinity and Power* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 3: 'Masculinity...does not exist in isolation from femininity—it will always be an expression of the current image that men have of themselves in relation to women'.

³. W. Farrell, 'Men as Success Objects', *Utne Reader* (May/June, 1991), pp. 81-84.

group.⁴

3. The third rule is: Be aggressive. From childhood, boys are encouraged to be tough, to fight, and not to run away. Competitive sport emphasizes these values, and in many cultures military training reinforces them.⁵

4. The fourth demand is: Be sexual. Men are supposed to be sexually experienced, and to be always interested in sex.⁶ 'Sex isn't a free choice when you have to perform to be a man.'⁷

5. Fifthly, the rule for men is: Be self-reliant. 'Men are supposed to be confident, independent and autonomous ... A "real man" doesn't need others, particularly women. He depends on himself, takes care of himself, and relies on nobody.'⁸

Now there is nothing natural or God-given about these roles. Masculinity, like femininity, is a social construction, the product of historical processes, as much a human construct as the pyra-

⁴. Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case against Competition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), p. 168.

⁵. See also Brittan, *Masculinity and Power*, Chapter 4 'Masculinity and Competitiveness' (pp. 77-107).

⁶. Cf. W. Gaylin, *The Male Ego* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 1992).

⁷. Wood, *Gendered Lives*, p. 81.

⁸. Wood, *Gendered Lives*, p. 81. This is not of course the only analysis of the male role that can be and has been made. Catharine Stimpson, for example, identifies three ways in which 'real men' define themselves: they earn money in the public labour force and so support their families; they have formal power over the women and children in those families; they are heterosexual with the women they dominate and bully other men who are not heterosexual (Catharine R. Stimpson, 'Foreword' to *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies* [ed. Harry Brod; New York: Routledge, 1987], p. xiii. And here is another much-cited account of the typical male: 'Someone who: is aggressive, independent, unemotional, or hides his emotions; is objective, easily influenced, dominant, likes maths and science; is not excitable in a minor crisis; is active, competitive, logical, worldly, skilled in business, direct, knows the ways of the world; is someone whose feelings are not easily hurt; is adventurous, makes decisions easily, never cries, acts as a leader; is self-confident; is not uncomfortable about being aggressive; is ambitious, able to separate feelings from ideas; is not dependent, nor conceited about his appearance; thinks men are superior to women, and talks freely about sex with men' (Fay Fransella and Kay Frost, *On Being a Woman: A Review of Research on How Women See Themselves* [London: Tavistock, 1977, pp. 43-44], cited by Ann Oakley, *Subject Women* [Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981], p. 64).

mids or pewter, as Catharine Stimpson puts it.⁹ To be masculine, as she says, is ‘to have a particular psychological identity, social role, cultural script, place in the labor force, and sense of the sacred’¹⁰—and all of those elements are socially constructed.

Different societies write different scripts for their men, so it is a priori likely that maleness in the modern West does not closely resemble maleness in ancient Israel. But this is at the moment a rather new question, and we have as yet no resources to tell us about Israelite masculinity. None of the Bible dictionaries, for example, broaches this fundamental cultural subject, though they are packed with trivia about the material culture of the world of the Bible. We have to start more or less from scratch.

And we had better be open to the possibility of a plurality of masculinities. Perhaps the society legitimated more than one way of being a man—though perhaps not, since social pressures tend toward uniformity rather than diversity.¹¹ More significant is the fact that not all males, in whatever culture, conform with the social norms. The norms may privilege young, heterosexual, strong and physical men, for example, and those who cannot be so characterized will be deviants from socially acceptable maleness. But they will still be males. We can expect, then, to find in our texts, as well as in our own society, representations of conflicting masculinities.

2. *Being a Man in the David Story*

My scope here is the David story (1 Samuel 16 to 1 Kings 2), which is of course not the same thing as: ancient Israel. How typical the masculinity of this story is of the Hebrew Bible as a

⁹. Stimpson, ‘Foreword’ to *The Making of Masculinities*, p. xiii.

¹⁰. Stimpson, ‘Foreword’ to *The Making of Masculinities*, p. xii.

¹¹. Even in a period of rapid social change such as our own, the blueprint of gender stereotypes remains remarkably constant; cf. Wood, *Gendered Lives*, p. 21; F. Cancian, ‘Love and the Rise of Capitalism’, in *Gender in Intimate Relationships* (ed. B. Risman and P. Schwartz; Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1989), pp. 12-25. Of course, it is all too easy to slip into various intellectual sins over this matter of defining masculinity; David H.J. Morgan, for example, warns against the errors of essentialism, reductionism and reification (*Discovering Men* [Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities, 3; London: Routledge, 1992], pp. 41-43).

whole I do not know, yet; and how the literary representations of masculinity in our texts relate to real men (not ‘real men’) in ancient Israel I shall never know. But my guess is that the myth of masculinity inscribed in the David story was a very potent influence upon Israelite men, and I am quite sure that the construction of masculinity in the David story was not invented by its author—or by some historical David—but reflects the cultural norms of men of the author’s time.

In the world of the David story, then, what are the components of masculinity? Almost the first words we read about David go a long way, it so happens, toward answering that question. In 1 Sam. 16.18 one of Saul’s servants describes him, to Saul and to the readers: David is a mighty man of valour (לַיָּד רַב־בָּרָא), a warrior (הַמְּלִיחַ מִלְחָמָה), intelligent in speech (רַב־דַּבָּר), a beautiful man (רַתֵּן מְאֹד), and skilful in playing (יָדָיו מְעֻלָּם).¹²

1. *The fighting male*

The essential male characteristic in the David story is to be a warrior, a man of war (הַמְּלִיחַ מִלְחָמָה) or mighty man of valour (לַיָּד רַב־בָּרָא).

Throughout the story, all the principal characters are warriors who spend a lot of their time fighting and killing. Here is a list of references to these activities:

David kills Goliath, 1 Sam. 17.50

He is said to have slain ten thousands, 18.7; 29.5

He is made the commander of a thousand, 18.13

He is commanded by Saul to fight Yahweh’s battles on Saul’s behalf, 18.17

He kills 200 Philistines for their foreskins, 18.27

He goes on fighting Philistines, 18.30

He makes a great slaughter of the Philistines, 19.8

Doeg kills 85 priests, 22.18

¹². He is obviously overqualified for the job of court musician, as Brueggemann wryly observes (Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* [Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990], p. 125). Heather McKay reminds me in this connection of the stained-glass window in the parish church in Fairlie, Ayrshire, in which the hyper-competent young David bows beneath the weight of his shepherd’s crook, his throwing-stone, his scrip, his lyre—and his psalm-book.

David makes a great slaughter of the Philistines at Keilah, 23.5
 There is a battle with the Philistines at Mt Gilboa, 31.1
 The Philistines kill Jonathan and other sons of Saul, 31.2
 An Amalekite kills Saul, 2 Sam. 1.10
 David has the Amalekite killed, 1.15
 Joab and Abishai kill Abner, 3.30
 Rechab and Baanah kill Ishbosheth, 4.7
 David has Rechab and Baanah killed, 4.12
 He defeats Philistines, Moabites, Hadadezer, 8.1-3
 He kills 22,000 Syrians, 8.5
 He kills 18,000 Edomites, 8.13
 Joab leads Israelites in battle against Ammonites and Syrians, 10.6-9
 David leads Israelites in battle against Syrians, 10.17
 David kills the Syrian general Shobach, 40,000 horsemen and the men of 700 chariots, 10.18
 Joab besieges the Ammonites of Rabbah, 11.1; 12.26
 David arranges for Uriah's death, 11.15
 Absalom's servants kill Amnon, 13.28-29
 David's warriors kill 20,000 of Absalom's forces, 18.7
 Joab and his warriors kill Absalom, 18.14-15
 Joab kills Amasa, 20.10
 The men of Abel Beth Maacah behead Sheba, 20.22
 David gives seven sons of Saul to the Gibeonites to be killed, 21.6-9
 David fights Philistines, 21.15
 Abishai kills the Philistine Ishbosheth, 21.17
 There are three further battles with Philistines, 21.18-20
 David's warrior Josheb-basshebeth killed 800 men at one time, 23.8
 David's warriors Eleazar and Shammah killed many Philistines, 23.10, 12
 Abishai killed 300 men, 23.18
 Benaiah killed an Egyptian (and perhaps two Moabites), 23.20-21
 David commands the killing of Joab and Shimei, 1 Kgs 2.6, 8-9 (2.34, 46)

David's body count, by this reckoning, is something like 140,000 men, in addition to the 15 individuals whose deaths he is said to have been personally responsible for. According to the biblical text of the David story, indeed, ancient Israel as a whole was a warrior society: in Israel there were 800,000 warriors 'who drew the sword', and in Judah 500,000 (2 Sam. 24.9). No matter whether these figures have historical value or not; they are the impression the text wants to create, they constitute the narrator's representation of his society.

It is essential for a man in the David story that he be strong—which means to say, capable of violence against other men and active in killing other men. The language of strength is pervasive; here are merely some examples:

- David ‘prevails’ (qzj) over the Philistine Goliath, 1 Sam. 17.50
- Joab speaks of the Syrians being ‘too strong’ for him or the Ammonites being ‘too strong’ for his brother Abishai, 2 Sam. 10.11
- Amnon ‘overpowered’ (qzj) his sister Tamar and raped her, 13.14
- God has girded David with strength for battle, 22.40
- Saul and Jonathan are lamented by David as ‘the mighty’, 1.19, 21, 22, 24, 27
- David is surrounded by warriors known as his ‘mighty men’, 10.7; 16.6; 17.8; 20.7; 23.8, 9, 16, 17, 22
- David himself is described by Hushai to Absalom as a man of war and the men with him as ‘hardened warriors and as a bear in the wilds robbed of her cubs’, 17.8, 10
- Warriors should be ‘lion-hearted’, 17.10
- The ‘hand’ as the symbol of power is almost a leitmotif of the David narrative: 1 Sam. 17.37, 46, 47; 18.17, 21, 25; 20.16; 22.17; 23.4, 7, 11, 12, 14, 16, 17, 20; 24.5, 7, 11, 13, 14, 16, 19, 21; 25.26, 33; 26.8, 9, 11, 23; 27.1; 28.19; 30.15, 23; 2 Sam. 1.14; 2.7; 3.8, 12, 18, 34; 4.1; 5.19; 8.1; 10.10; 12.7; 14.19; 16.8, 21; 17.2; 18.2, 12, 19, 28; 20.21; 21.9, 22; 22.35; 23.6, 10; 24.14, 16, 17.

Physical strength and the capacity to kill other men manifests itself sometimes as what we might call courage, even to the point of recklessness. Hebrew has no words for courage or bravery as distinct from strength, but our modern versions sometimes are right to translate words from the root qzj (‘be strong’) as ‘courage, courageous’.¹³ Thus in 2 Sam. 10.12, for example, Joab says to his brother Abishai, ‘Be strong (qzj), and let us show ourselves strong (qzj t^{rw})¹⁴ for the sake of our people and for the sake of the cities of our God’. When Absalom commissions his servants to assassinate Amnon (2 Sam. 13.28), he tells them not to fear: *l yj Aynbl wyhw wqzj* ‘be courageous and be valiant’ (RSV; REB has ‘be bold and resolute’).

¹³. ‘Courage’ also appears in RSV in a non-military context in 2 Sam. 7.27: ‘therefore thy servant has found courage (lit. has found his heart) to pray this prayer to thee’.

¹⁴. RSV ‘let us play the man’, following AV ‘let us play the men’, probably borrows the idiom from 1 Sam. 4.9.

Or, to take another example, from a little outside the David story itself, in 1 Sam. 4.9 the Philistines say to one another, having learned that the ark of Yahweh has come into their camp: 'Take courage (lit. be strong), and acquit yourselves like men, O

Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; acquit yourselves like men and fight'. This phrase 'acquit yourselves like men', literally 'become men' (μυvnaλ wyh, repeated as μυvnaλ μtyyh), means, very simply, that to be a man is to fight. The whole ideology surrounding this utterance is a little more complex than that, no doubt; for the purpose of fighting is to resist slavery for oneself and to continue to keep others in slavery; and the possibility that fighting may not ensure that objective, and that the chance of being victorious can hardly be greater than fifty-fifty, is silently suppressed. But as far as the gender issue is concerned, it is simple: men fight.

2. *The persuasive male*

It is obviously also an important male role in Israel to be good with words, as David is described by Saul's servant (1 Sam. 16.18): he is 'intelligent in speech' (rbd ʿwbn). The term ʿwbn 'intelligent' is used elsewhere of Joseph (Gen. 41.33, 39), of tribal elders (Deut. 1.13) and of Solomon (1 Kgs 3.12), but nowhere else in the combination rbd ʿwbn 'intelligent in speech'. Fokkelman thinks that this quality, 'so closely linked to the cares of state, the public interest, and the law', must be 'an anticipation of David's functioning as king';¹⁵ but it is something true of David long before he is king, something that belongs rather with his masculinity than with his kingship.

Where is this characteristic of David's, intelligent speech, evident in the text? Ralph W. Klein points to 1 Sam. 17.34-36, where David persuades Saul that he is capable of withstanding Goliath, 24.10-15, where he explains to Saul why he did not kill him in the cave, and 26.18-20, where David asks Saul why he continues to pursue him, and Saul admits that he has done wrong (26.21).

¹⁵ J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analyses. II. The Crossing Fates (I Sam. 13-31 & II Sam. 1)* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), p. 137. A.R.S. Kennedy thought that the phrase connects closely with ʿgn [dy 'knowing how to play (an instrument)', in reference either to the recitative that accompanied the music or to David's 'ready wit' (*Samuel: Introduction, Revised Version with Notes, Index and Maps* [Edinburgh: T.C. & E.C. Jack, n.d.], p. 119). But this requires deletion of the phrase hmj l m vyaw l yj rwbqw as a secondary intrusion.

These are all effective examples of the power of words, not in any magical sense, but as instruments of control. To be master of persuasion is to have another form of power, which is not an alternative to, and far less a denatured version of, physical strength, but part of the repertory of the powerful male. We think of Odysseus too, who is before everything πολὺ-ἔμπροπός, not merely 'much travelled' but 'versatile, ingenious, wily'.¹⁶

Intelligent, eloquent, persuasive speech forms part of a wider category of 'wisdom', to which Norman Whybray has drawn attention as an important motif in the 'Succession Narrative'.¹⁷ In 2 Sam. 14.20 the woman from Tekoa says that the king 'has wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of God to know all things that are on the earth', and in 1 Kgs 2.6, 9 David assumes royal wisdom in his successor Solomon by urging him to 'act according to your wisdom' in seeing that Joab and Shimei are killed. Among the examples of 'wisdom' in the David story cited by Whybray are: David's attempts to extricate himself from the results of his adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11.14-25), Joab's use of the woman of Tekoa 'in order to change the course of affairs' (RSV), Absalom's words by which he 'stole the hearts of the men of Israel' (2 Sam. 15.1-6), and David's sending Hushai to give false advice to Absalom (2 Sam. 15.33-35).

The fact that there are also intelligent and persuasive women speakers in the David story, such as Abigail and the woman of Tekoa, by no means undercuts the assertion that this is a characteristic of masculinity.¹⁸ It is precisely because our own culture

¹⁶. Homer, *Odyssey* 1.1. He is, according to W.B. Stanford (*The Odyssey of Homer* [London: Macmillan, 2nd edn, 1959], pp. xii-xiii), 'a symbol of the Ionic-Greek Everyman in his eloquence, cleverness, unscrupulousness, intellectual curiosity, courage, endurance, shrewdness'.

¹⁷. R.N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative: A Study of II Sam. 9-20 and I Kings 1 and 2* (Studies in Biblical Theology, 2/9; London: SCM Press, 1968), pp. 57-60, 90.

¹⁸. It would be interesting to know if eloquence was perhaps not expected of a woman in ancient Israel. In Luther's Germany it wasn't. Praising his wife's fluency, he remarked one day at table, '[E]loquence in women shouldn't be praised; it's more fitting for them to lisp and stammer. This is more becoming to them. In men speech is a great and divine gift' (Martin Luther, in *Luther's Works*. 54. *Table Talk* [ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967], p. 317).

insists so strongly on defining a man as ‘not a woman’ that we are tempted to think that anything a woman can do cannot also be characteristically male; but that is a fallacy.

3. *The beautiful male*

One of the distinctive features noted by Saul’s servant about David is that he is a beautiful man: he is a *rat vya*, ‘a man of (beautiful) form’ (1 Sam. 16.18). Beautiful people in the Bible are both male and female: Rachel is ‘beautiful of form’ (*ratAtpy*, Gen. 29.17), as is Abigail (1 Sam. 25.3); Esther is *harm tbwfw ratAtpy* ‘fair of form and beautiful in looks’ in Est. 2.7,¹⁹ and Bathsheba is ‘very beautiful in appearance’ (*dam harm tbwf*, 2 Sam. 11.2). Among the males there is Joseph, who is ‘beautiful of form and beautiful of appearance’ (*harm hpyw ratAhtpy*, Gen. 39.6), and Adonijah, who is ‘very beautiful’ (*dam ratAbwf*, 1 Kgs 1.6).²⁰ Saul is a ‘handsome’ (*bwfw*)²¹ young man (*rwj b*) and there is none among the Israelites more handsome (*bwfw*) than him; he is taller than any other Israelite (1 Sam. 9.2). David is ‘ruddy’ (*ynwmda*)—whatever exactly that means, it obviously refers to some aspect of physical beauty²²—and ‘fair of eyes’ (*μywy [hpy]*)²³ and ‘beautiful in appearance’ (*yar bwfw*) in 1 Sam 16.12. In 17.42 he is ‘ruddy’ (*ynwmda*) ‘with beauty of appearance’ (*harm hpyAm []*).²⁴ Of Absalom we hear that ‘in

¹⁹. And Tamar is *hpy* ‘beautiful’ in 2 Sam. 13.1.

²⁰. The same phrase may lie behind LXX’s ἀγαθὸς τῷ εἶδει here; it is ὠραῖος τῆ ὄψει at 1 Kgs 1.6.

²¹. Moses as a child is also seen to be *bwfw* ‘beautiful’ (Exod. 2.2).

²². It is generally thought to refer to the colour of the skin, but Kennedy, *Samuel*, p. 118, thinks (following Klostermann) that it may be the colour of the hair, and finds it interesting to think of David as the *red-haired* ‘darling of the songs of Israel’ (2 Sam. 23.1), ‘or, as Browning has it in his *Saul*, “God’s child with his dew, On thy gracious gold hair”’.

²³. P. Kyle McCarter, Jr, *I Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (Anchor Bible, 8; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), p. 275, emends ‘with some confidence’ *μ [ynwmda* to *μy [nw md* ‘ruddy and attractive’ (cf. *μwda* ‘ruddy’ in Cant. 5.10).

²⁴. Some manuscripts have *μywy [hpy* ‘beautiful of eyes’; cf. LXX μετὰ κάλλους ὀφθαλμῶν. McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 275, deletes *harm hpyAm [ynwmdaw* as an expansion inspired by 1 Sam. 16.12; Peter R. Ackroyd is similarly tempted (*The First Book of Samuel* [The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971], p. 145).

all Israel there was not a man so much to be praised for his beauty (lit. there was not [such] a beautiful man, *hpyAvya*); ‘from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him’ (2 Sam. 14.25). And there is of course the servant of Isaiah 53, who because of his disfigurement has no ‘form’ (*rat*) or ‘splendour’ (*rdh*) that ‘we’ should gaze upon (*har*) him, and no ‘appearance’ (*harm*) that ‘we’ should desire (*dmj*) him (53.2); it is implied that ordinarily one would expect a high-ranking ‘servant of Yahweh’ to be beautiful in form and face, and to be sexually attractive (*dmj*) to ‘us’ (? males).

Samuel is obviously impressed by male beauty. When he ‘sees’ Jesse’s eldest son Eliab, he thinks, ‘Surely here, before the LORD, is his anointed king’ (1 Sam. 16.6 REB). The word ‘beauty’ is not there, but the word ‘sees’ is; what the male gaze sees attracts it, though its super-ego may feel uncomfortable about feeling attracted. Says Yahweh to Samuel, ‘Pay no attention to his outward appearance and stature... The LORD does not see as a mortal sees; mortals see only appearances but the LORD sees into the heart’ (v. 7 REB). But then Samuel catches sight of Saul, ‘handsome, with ruddy cheeks and bright eyes’ (v. 12 REB), and, with wondrous irony, as Walter Brueggemann puts it, ‘Samuel and the narrator are dazzled’;²⁵ and Yahweh, who of course does not see as a mortal sees, seizes the moment: ‘This is the man; rise and anoint him’ (v. 12), he commands.

Beauty is not generally a state to which a man who does not have it can aspire,²⁶ but obviously it is very desirable, in the world of the David story, for a man to be beautiful. Beauty is to be seen, at the least, in bodily shape, in the eyes, in the skin colour, and in the height. The language used here is not of some

²⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 122-23.

²⁶ I should not omit the concept of ‘body building’, however. Rowena Chapman writes archly of those ‘paragons of male aesthetics, rippling poems of perfect pectorals and shuddering quads, testimonies to current canons of male beauty... Everyone knows you don’t get a body like that just by whistling[;] it requires effort, patience and commitment’ (‘The Great Pretender: Variations on the New Man Theme’, in *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity* [ed. Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988], pp. 225-48 [237]).

diffused notion of 'good looks', but reflects some quite precise and analytical thought about what makes a man beautiful. From the description of Absalom we learn that beauty is not regarded by men in Israel as a mere accident of birth that is for the most part to be shrugged off as the way the cookie crumbles. Rather, it is an aspect of 'real manhood' for which a man can expect praise and admiration.

4. *The bonding male*

A further important characteristic of maleness in the David story is friendship between males, specifically the type of friendship now known as 'male bonding'.²⁷ Friendship is not of course a simple category, and several typologies have been advanced that identify friendships along a continuum ranging from the 'affective' to the 'instrumental'.²⁸ Those friendships within the David story have strong elements of the types at both poles. Noting how little David and Jonathan seem to know one another or how few things they do together, we need to recognize that there is more than one kind of friendship, and that emotional intimacy is not necessarily part of male friendship, or at least that ideas of intimacy are not necessarily the same for men and for women. In a word, 'male bonding is not a vehicle for male-male *emotional* relationships, but rather is a substitute for

²⁷. The term seems to have been first used by Lionel Tiger, in his *Men in Groups* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1969). Among recent studies of male bonding in literary texts may be mentioned those of Donald J. Geiner, *Women Enter the Wilderness: Male Bonding and the American Novel of the 1980s* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), advancing the questionable theory that in the last decade the tendency in (white, male) American novels has been for male bonding to be less exclusive of women; Anne J. Cruz, 'Homo ex machina? Male Bonding in Calderón's *A secreto agravio, secreta vengenza*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 25 (1989), pp. 154-66.

²⁸. Cf. Y.A. Cohen, 'Patterns of Friendship', in *Social Structure and Personality* (ed. Y.A. Cohen; New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961); E. Wolf, 'Kinship, Friendship and Patron-Client Relationships in Complex Societies', in *The Social Anthropology of Complex Societies* (ed. M. Banton; London: Tavistock, 1966), pp. 3-27; Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow, 'Gilgamesh and the Sundance Kid: The Myth of Male Friendship', in *The Making of Masculinities*, pp. 241-58 (243-45).

them'.²⁹

In their delightfully entitled paper, 'Gilgamesh and the Sundance Kid: The Myth of Male Friendship', Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow have traced a widespread myth of male friendship, which 'dramatizes the devotion between male friends, usually a dyad, forged in an agonistic setting',³⁰ from its classic expression in the Gilgamesh epic, through Homer and the Bible to the *Song of Roland*, bush 'mateship' in the short stories of the Australian writer Henry Lawson, comrades in arms in films of the world wars, heroes of frontier America like the Lone Ranger and Tonto, near-mythic figures like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and even, with a gender twist, to Cagney and Lacey. In its classical formulations, as with Gilgamesh and Enkidu, David and Jonathan, Achilles and Patroclus, Orestes and Pylades, Castor and Pollux, Damon and Pythias, the friends are typically heroes: 'aristocratic, young, brave, and beautiful. In their free and wholehearted response to one another, they openly declare their affection and admiration. They engage in many adventures and battles, sharing danger, loyal to the death. Throughout life, they remain devoted and generous to each other.'³¹ Such male friendship is of course not the opposite of female friendship, and I am not suggesting that the Hebrews knew of no other ways for men to be friends except on the pattern of David and Jonathan. But I am arguing that this model of heroic male bonding is one important way masculinity was constructed in ancient Israel and, as well, that the David narrative itself had a significant role in sustaining that construction.

According to Hammond and Jablow, the function of male friendship in this tradition was to provide a source of support that was freely chosen without the constraints of kinship, a support that perhaps had emotional dimensions that could not be

²⁹. Pleck, *The Myth of Masculinity*, p. 150 (italics mine). And, while 'males measure no lower than females in sociability, they do measure lower in intimacy' (p. 149). Cf. also Drury Sherrod, 'The Bonds of Men: Problems and Possibilities in Close Male Relationships', in *The Making of Masculinities*, pp. 213-39 (217): '[w]omen seem to look for intimate confidantes, while men seek for partners for adventure'.

³⁰. Hammond and Jablow, 'Gilgamesh and the Sundance Kid', p. 245.

³¹. Hammond and Jablow, 'Gilgamesh and the Sundance Kid', p. 247.

provided within a system of kinship and arranged marriages. Such male friendships operated especially in the public domain, which meant in practice in many societies, in warfare. In that context, familial support was unavailable, and warriors needed the support of likeminded and equally isolated men. At least in classical Greece, and probably also in Israel, such male friendships had no overt homosexual element; certainly in Greece, homosexual love was typically between an older lover and a younger beloved,³² whereas male bonding friends were peers—as were Jonathan and David.

The ideology of such male friendship contains these elements: loyalty to one another, a dyadic relationship with an exclusive tendency, a commitment to a common cause, and a valuing of the friendship above all other relationships. In such a friendship there is not necessarily a strong emotional element; the bond may be more instrumental and functional than affective. Perhaps that is the nature of the bond between David and Jonathan, and that is one of the ways in which they subscribe to, and promote, the Hebrew ideology of masculinity.

5. *The womanless male*

One of the concomitants of strong male bonding is of course a relative minimizing of cross-sex relationships. It may seem strange to speak of David, a man with eight principal wives and at least ten others of secondary rank (2 Sam. 15.16), as 'womanless'. But it is a striking feature of the David story that the males are so casual about women, and that women are so marginal to the lives of the protagonists. There is in this story, on the whole, no sexual desire, no love stories, no romances, no wooing, no daring deeds for the sake of a beloved. This is not a world in which men long for women. It is rather a matter of pride for David and his men, in fact, that they have kept themselves 'clean' from women: ' , he avers.

There *is* sex in the story, of course, but it is perfunctory and usually politically motivated. The classic case in the David story is that of Absalom, who has sex with ten of his father's secondary wives 'in the sight of all Israel' simply in order to lay

³². Cf. Kenneth J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

claim to the throne of his father (2 Sam. 16.21-23). Even in the Bathsheba episode, the sex is essentially an expression of royal power, and it is much more like rape than love.

In the one case where sexual desire comes into the foreground, it is accompanied by strongly negative connotations. Amnon 'loves' his sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13.2). But such love is not good for him: he is in distress (rnx) to the point of becoming ill (hlj hithpa.) 'on account of' (NIV) (rwb[b] her, but perhaps rather we should translate it 'because of her'—as if it were her fault.³³ He is no longer in control of himself, but feels compelled to satisfy his lust, which he can only do by trickery, incest and rape. And the desire he experiences is unsatisfying and ephemeral: his love for her immediately turns to hatred. What is more, his desire has fearful consequences: he himself becomes hated by his brother and the object of his father's anger, and eventually he meets his death—just because of his sexual desire and experience. The message plainly is that sex can damage your health very severely, and nothing in the narrative of David goes to show that more definitively than the key episode of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11).

We have to conclude that David does not actually like women very much, and certainly has no fun with them. If he can say that Jonathan's love has been 'wonderful', better than the love of women, and he has (as far as I can judge) never been to bed with Jonathan, it doesn't say a lot for his love life.

But more important than David's sexual experience is the image of masculinity that the David story promotes. It says loud and clear, if only ever implicitly, that a real man can get along fine without women; he can have several women in a casual kind of way, but he has nothing to gain from them except children, and he owes them nothing. Hanging over every woman is the spectre of fatal attraction; like the 'wily' woman of Proverbs 7, every woman is potentially a road to Sheol, a way down to the chambers of death (Prov. 7.27). A man does well to steer clear of women, a man does not need women, a man is not constituted by his relationship with women. It is a different story if we substitute 'other men' for 'women' in the previous sentence.

³³. Cases where rwb[b] implies responsibility are, for example: Gen. 3.17; 8.21; 12.13, 16; 18.26, 29, 31, 32; 26.24.

f. *The musical male*

A final characteristic of David, according to the glowing report of the servant of Saul, is that David is ‘skilful in playing the lyre’ (‘*gn* [*dy*] lit. ‘knowing, i.e. experienced at, playing [a stringed instrument]’, 1 Sam. 16.18). I thought at first that musicianship was not an especially masculine trait in David, but just an accidental feature of his characterization, more dependent on his role in the narrative (like the notation that ‘Yahweh was with him’) than upon the Hebrew construction of masculinity. In any case, I would not want to lay too much weight upon this speech by a servant of Saul; it is certainly not meant by him to be a definitive summary of the characteristics of Israelite masculinity. Nevertheless, the servant of Saul certainly encourages us to ponder whether this element in the picture of David—alongside his being a warrior, a persuasive speaker and a beautiful man—may not itself be an expression of his maleness.

We ourselves are hardly inclined to distinguish between the sexes in the matter of musical ability, and would readily ascribe the predominance of males as composers of music and as orchestral conductors, for example, to more general social structures. My own modern construction of masculinity was no doubt an important reason why I did not myself immediately recognize David’s musical talent as a masculine trait.³⁴ Is it, though? What is the evidence?

In the Hebrew Bible, women as well as men make music. But is the music-making they engage in a gendered activity? Women are singers, accompanying themselves with timbrels and tambourines and other assorted idiophones (like the *vyl v*, [?] ‘sistrum’) and membranophones (like the *t*, [?] ‘timbrel, tambourine, drum’).³⁵ The playing of stringed instruments, on the other hand, seems to have been largely a male activity. It would

³⁴ I am grateful to Francis Landy for urging me to consider David’s musicality more seriously.

³⁵ For the categories, see Ivor H. Jones, ‘Music and Musical Instruments’, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), IV, pp. 930-39. For the sistrum as played by women, see 1 Sam. 18.6; for the timbrel, Exod. 15.11; Judg. 11.34; 1 Sam. 18.6; Jer. 31.4.

not be that ancient Israelite women were incapable of playing stringed instruments, of course, but rather that skill in playing—playing ‘with the hand’ (wdyb, 1 Sam 16.16, 23), i.e. with dextrous use of the fingers, would be a male preserve. If we look at the references to the lyre (rwnk, often translated as ‘harp’), which is David’s speciality, and is referred to more than 40 times in the Hebrew Bible, the only place where a woman plays it is in Isa. 23.16: it is Tyre as a prostitute who takes a lyre and makes sweet melody (‘gn byfyh).³⁶ The exception proves the rule. Women never play the lbn, (?) ‘lute’ or the bqwl, (?) ‘harp’.

Perhaps we should conclude therefore that David’s kind of music, and his pre-eminence in playing it, is represented in the narrative as an essentially male trait.

g. *A Conflict of Masculinities?*

Now that we have reviewed what seem to be the leading male characteristics in the figure of David, there is another question that needs yet to be raised. It is, Are there any conflicting masculinities within the David story? Focussing exclusively on David, I ask, Does David himself conform entirely to one set of models for maleness? Are there ways, for example, in which David breaks free of the role of the traditional male, are there any hints that David might be something of a ‘new man’?³⁷

At first sight this may seem to be so. There are several episodes in which David acts contrary to what seem to be the standards of a traditional masculinity. Joab puts it famously when he says, ‘You love those who hate you and hate those who love you... Today I perceive that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased’ (2 Sam. 19.6). We (I mean, we modern westerners) are rather attracted to this trait in David—even if it does not immediately resonate for us with

³⁶. In Sir. 9.4 also the reader is advised not to dally (or sleep) with tnygnm; whether they are women who play instruments or ‘singing girls’ (as JB, NAB) is not certain. In the LXX the term is ψάλλουσα, but in Hellenistic Greek, ψάλλω seems to mean ‘sing’, with or without accompaniment (in classical Greek it was ‘pluck [a stringed instrument]’).

³⁷. See the brilliant essay by Rowena Chapman, ‘The Great Pretender: Variations on the New Man Theme’, in *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, pp. 225-48.

Christian overtones. Many readers would agree with Cheryl Exum that the whole episode of Absalom's revolt brings before us a 'rare, intimate view of David' and that '[i]n his vulnerability the king becomes most sympathetic'.³⁸ At the very least, we are inclined with her to find marks of 'tragic conflict' and 'grief, so tragically excessive', and to behold a man who 'endures, broken in spirit', a man in extremity, who has 'expended all emotion'.³⁹

But what if the burden of the text, reading with the grain of its gender codes, that is to say, is not that David is somehow noble and tragically heroic in this scene, but is simply a failure as a man, as a male. What reason have we to think that the narrator has any sympathy for David? On the contrary, he has Joab roundly rebuke David in terms no one has ever dared use with him before,⁴⁰ and David, for his part, does not defend himself against Joab's criticism but meekly capitulates, arising and taking his seat in the gate (19.8). In short, we ourselves may find David interesting precisely because he sometimes lapses from the ideals of traditional masculinity; but that does not mean that the text has relaxed its allegiance to those norms for an instant.⁴¹ The text represents David as a great hero, but a fallible one; and his fallibility only serves to inscribe yet deeper the authority of the cultural norms of his time.

Reading from this direction, perhaps another unexpected episode in the David story makes better sense. While the child of his union with Bathsheba is dying, David fasts and will not be roused from his identification with the child in its weakness; but

³⁸. J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 130. There is an appeal in a footnote to Charles Conroy, *Absalom Absalom! Narrative and Language in 2 Sam. 13–20* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), pp. 111-12. And cf. Walter Brueggemann, *David's Truth in Israel's Imagination and Memory* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 47: 'If there had been no interiority to David, if there were only public events, the narrative would scarcely attract us'.

³⁹. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, p. 135.

⁴⁰. As Exum notes (*Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, p. 135).

⁴¹. Brueggemann sees this when he words Joab's rebuke as a warning that 'if [David's] personal pain is allowed to erode a good public presence, the whole fragile "house of authority" will quickly collapse' (*David's Truth*, p. 72).

the moment the child has died, David pragmatically resumes his normal activity and abandons his grieving (2 Sam. 12.15-23). Readers of David's behaviour, starting with his puzzled servants in the text, have often found something both fascinating and repellent here,⁴² but none, I think, has seen it as the outworking of a gender code. If men of David's time are to be strong, David's response to the child's death is the ultimate macho act, the fitting conclusion to a narrative of aggressive masculinity that began with the rape of Bathsheba and continued with the cynical disposal of her husband. In this story, even God is treated by David in a purely instrumental way: David fasts and prays only so long as he thinks he can affect God's determination of the outcome; the moment God takes the child's life, David knows he is defeated, and abandons his weapon of a self-serving piety.⁴³ Whether the excessive grief over the dying child conformed with the male script of his culture or not I do not know; but if it did not, David certainly compensated very shortly for his lapse from its standards.

What of the occasions when David capitulates to fate? Are these signs of a character that is in resistance to male norms of success and indomitableness? Are they the hint of a narrator that there can be more to being a man than playing out traditional gender roles? I am thinking of the time when David hears the news that Absalom has been proclaimed king in Hebron and promptly vacates Jerusalem (2 Sam. 15.13-23). When Abiathar and Zadok volunteer to bring the ark with David into exile, David tells them to take it back: 'If I find favour in the eyes of Yahweh', he says, 'he will bring me back and let me see both it and his habitation; but if he says, "I have no pleasure in you", behold, here I am; let him do to me what seems good to him'

⁴². Though some think it 'an act of profound faith in the face of the most precious tabus of his people' (Walter Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* [Richmond: John Knox Press, 1972], p. 36), or an affirmation of David's 'belief in Yahweh's freedom to repay as he chooses' (David M. Gunn, *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation* [Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 6; Sheffield: JSOT, 1978], p. 110).

⁴³. Brueggemann, *David's Truth*, p. 53, acknowledges that 'the over-riding mark of David is his *self-serving*'.

(15.25-26). A little later, he is faced by Shimei, cursing and throwing stones. But David resists Abishai's offer to 'go over and take off his head' (16.9), saying, 'Let him alone, and let him curse, for Yahweh has bidden him. It may be that Yahweh will look upon my affliction, and that Yahweh will repay me with good for this cursing of me today' (16.11-12). Is David being portrayed in these incidents as 'a man of stunning faith', moved by 'more than moral courage of a tragic kind'?⁴⁴ Or is it David abandoning the soldierly norms by which he has lived, making himself more sympathetic—to pacifists at least—in the process, but not in the least inspiring the hearers of his story to a post-masculinist worldview? Is it not, from the point of view of the narrator, a weakness in David as a man (though it is perhaps a strength in him as a human being, from our point of view) that he has caved in at the first rumour of opposition to him by Absalom?

There is no 'new man' here in the David story. There is a fully fledged traditional male, who for the most part recapitulates everything scripted for him by his culture, but now and then conspicuously fails—so conspicuously that any non-feminized reader knows immediately that it is a failure that is not to be excused or imitated, but is a sorry example that serves only to reinforce the value of the traditional norms.

3. *The Conflict of Masculinities: Ours and Theirs*

There are similarities and dissimilarities between our modern western masculinity and that of the David story. The most striking, and even perhaps the most foundational, of the dissimilarities is the modern self-definition of maleness over against femininity. In David's world, evidently, the spheres of men and women are so distinct, their cultural scripts so divergent, that neither defines self over against the other. If our culture represents the 'feminization' of society, as has been argued,⁴⁵ it makes

⁴⁴. Brueggemann, *David's Truth*, p. 53.

⁴⁵. Such 'feminization' has been seen, historically, most clearly by its opponents, such as the Boy Scout movement. See, for example, Joseph H. Pleck, 'The Theory of Male Sex-Role Identity: Its Rise and Fall, 1936 to the Present', in *The Making of Masculinities*, pp. 21-38 (23); Michael S. Kimmel,

sense that males now tend to define themselves oppositionally, having lost a distinct idea of their own role.

The foundational character of this oppositional self-definition is illustrated graphically, if rather trivially, by the idea of male beauty. In a world—like David’s—in which men do not have to be the opposite of women, there is no problem with men thinking of themselves and of other men as beautiful, indeed of beauty being a desirable male characteristic. But in our world, men go out of their way to avoid the idea, and have developed a language to repress it.

Perhaps another example where the oppositional self-definition has had influence is that of the persuasive male. In our culture, skill with words, especially persuasive speech, tends to be regarded as a female characteristic, and it does not figure among the typically male ideals analysed by Doyle and Wood. A characteristic male of our time is rather the strong silent type.

It is interesting to wonder how the evident lack of interest in sex in the David story, by contrast to our contemporary insistence on its near obligatoriness, fits in with the profile of masculinity in the text. Can it be that contemporary absorption in sex coheres with a masculinity that is not so sure of itself, that is troubled about self-definition and functionality? If sex is as much a way of finding oneself as finding the other, might finding oneself be a peculiarly modern desire, one that is not shared by the world of the text?⁴⁶

There are of course also the similarities to be considered. The crucial one is the demand to be aggressive. The idea of the warrior as the ideal of maleness is instantly recognizable in both cultures, even if most of the fighting today is done either by proxy in distant wars or metaphorically on the sports field or in the boardroom. Toughness and strength are still the cultural

‘The Contemporary “Crisis” of Masculinity in Historical Perspective’, in *The Making of Masculinities*, pp. 121-53 (143-49); Michael Messner, ‘The Meaning of Success: The Athletic Experience and the Development of Male Identity’, in *The Making of Masculinities*, pp. 193-209 (196).

⁴⁶ Cf. Robert Nozick, ‘Sexuality’, in *Gender Basics: Feminist Perspectives on Women and Men* (ed. Anne Minas; Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1993), pp. 302-306: ‘It is not only the other person who is known more deeply in sex. One knows one’s own self better in experiencing what it is capable of’ (p. 303).

script for boys and men, though what counts as toughness is not necessarily the same in the two cultures. David can cry, for example, without detriment to his masculinity, but a man who cries publicly today is still something of a deviant, an embarrassment at least, even if nothing worse.

The idea of success is common to both cultures too, of course. There is no point in fighting except to win, and success in the David story is measured by the body count. The idea of success in modern masculinity is very much more broadly based, however, and the modern male can easily be made to feel less than a man if he is unsuccessful in any area of his life. The problem with the criterion of success, especially when it is couched competitively, as in warfare or in sport or, often, in business, is that there are very many more failures than successes, so that the very structure of the male ideal ensures that most males will feel themselves inadequate in some way or other; the system is a 'structure of failure'. In the case of the sports world, for example, though the emphasis on competitive sports throughout the 1960s was founded on the premises that 'sports builds character' and 'a winner in sports will be a winner in life', the very opposite proves to be the case. And the criterion of success itself is self-defeating, since 'success' is almost never attainable in any absolute or permanent sense; it can only be an aspiration, so long as the message is conveyed that 'you're only as good as your last game'.⁴⁷ Whether the same intensity and comprehensiveness attaches to the idea of success in the David story is doubtful.

As for the idea of self-reliance, here too there are clear resonances between the ideals of masculinity in our culture and in David's world. But the meaning of self-reliance, and its depth, are different. The ideal of the supportive friend as part of the essence of maleness makes a lot of difference on this front.

So, even the similarities between their world and ours contain dissimilarities. What happens to those dissimilarities, I now ask, when readers from our culture read the David story?

⁴⁷ See further, Michael Messner, 'The Meaning of Success: The Athletic Experience and the Development of Male Identity', in *The Making of Masculinities*, pp. 193-209 (193-95, 199).

4. *The Triumph of Modern Masculinity*

The thesis of this final section is that the profile of masculinity in the modern world has, in the literature about David, overwhelmed the quite distinctive portrait of Hebrew masculinity in the David story.

1. *Approval*

The most striking aspect of the modern scholarly response to the figure of David in the biblical narrative is the strong note of approval that is struck. Why do scholars so unanimously defend David and gloss over his faults? Have they perhaps been over-influenced by the tone of the biblical narrator, who is remarkably reticent and averse to making judgments of the characters?⁴⁸ Have they perhaps read the narrative, which rarely if ever criticizes David, as approving of David's behaviour and character, and have they adopted the narrator's standpoint, whether consciously or not? This does not seem to be a probable explanation, since biblical narrators everywhere are notoriously reticent and scholars may be expected to take critical account of that fact.

Perhaps we should consider the theological dimension of the David figure, whether or not the sentence about his being 'a man after God's own heart' is taken literally or not. Those who see David as a prefigurement of the messiah, as, for example, 'the kingly ideal ... in the image of which [Israel] looked for a coming Messiah, who should deliver his people and sit upon the throne of David for ever',⁴⁹ might be inclined to minimize the negative aspects of David's character. This is no doubt a very powerful force in the interpretation of the figure of David, even up to the present day, as the conclusion of the article on David in the most

⁴⁸. A famous exception, so it is often said, is 2 Sam. 11.27, where the narrator writes apropos of the Bathsheba affair that 'the thing that David had done displeased Yahweh'. It is more probable, however, that this sentence is nothing more than a motivating sentence for the succeeding narrative of the death of the child of Bathsheba and David. On the matter of the narrator's reticence, cf. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), pp. 114-30.

⁴⁹. T.H. Jones, 'David', in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (ed. J.D. Douglas *et al.*; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), I, pp. 364-69 (369).

recent of scholarly Bible encyclopaedias will show:

Ultimately, however, David's lasting significance lay in his position as YHWH's chosen king for Israel and as the father of the royal dynasty that YHWH chose to bless. He occupied a midpoint between his great ancestor Abraham and his great descendant Jesus. The promises made to David stood in continuity with those to Abraham, and they pointed to a messianic ideal of great promise for the world, an ideal that, so Christians have affirmed, found its expression in Jesus, the Christ.⁵⁰

If that kind of assertion of mythical and cosmic significance is to form the conclusion of one's account of David, it is understandable that the character of David is likely to have met throughout the history of interpretation with considerable approval. Yet even this angle of approach, which is of course not shared by all scholars, does not satisfactorily account for the degree of approval David is accorded at the hands of scholars generally.

What I should like to suggest is that what male scholars (most who have written on the David story are males, not surprisingly) are responding to in the character of David is his masculinity, of which they themselves approve or to which they themselves are attracted. They view his masculinity through the lens of their own, of course, but there is enough commonality for them to identify themselves and their own desire with David. This is a gender-based hero-worship. They can, and must, excuse his faults and crimes because he is at bottom a man after their own heart—which is to say, their own image of masculinity. One writer of an current encyclopaedia article puts his finger on it exactly, if rather quaintly: 'he was all that men find wholesome and admirable in man'⁵¹—'wholesome' meaning that they approve of David, and 'admirable' meaning that they desire to be like him.

2. *Success*

A second main characteristic of the way in which the figure of David has been shaped by the norms of modern western masculinity is this: he has been aligned with the masculine model of

⁵⁰. David M. Howard, Jr, 'David', in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, I, pp. 41-48 (48).

⁵¹. Jones, 'David', in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, I, pp. 364-69 (369).

success.⁵²

Thus J.M. Myers, in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, concludes his article on David with an 'estimate', which displays David as wholly successful in every area of his life. David was honourable, dignified and loyal; he had a 'rare quality of diplomacy' (the choice of Jerusalem as his capital was 'another master stroke of diplomacy'); he was a great warrior and an excellent general; he was shrewd as a politician; he was a 'deeply religious man'; he was a poet and musician of note; and 'finally, David was a great organizer'.⁵³ That is to say, everything that David does, he does excellently and entirely successfully. What David does not do well has been totally suppressed from the 'estimate'. The commentator is comfortable with his article on David only if can show David to have been a success, for the commentator is scripted to desire success himself.

To take another example, David M. Howard, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, finds David to have been 'a shrewd military strategist and motivator', a skilful politician, and a talented administrator of the military, civil and religious bureaucracies. He had renowned skills as a 'poet, musician and sponsor of music'. He displayed 'a fine religious sensitivity for the most part', as evidenced by his 'relationship with his God, his concern for others' welfare, his ready repentance when confronted with his sin, and his concern for the religious matters pertaining to the temple and the cult'.⁵⁴ Everything that David does prospers, and although there is one point at which David is not perfect—his 'sin'—somehow that too becomes a sphere of success: David, admirably, shows 'ready repentance when confronted with his

⁵². I do not suggest that this focus entirely misconstrues the Hebrew narrative, for a sentence like 1 Sam. 18.14 encapsulates it very neatly: 'David was successful (lykcm) in all his undertakings, for Yahweh was with him'. And there is no doubt that the story of David can be subsumed under the rubric of success/failure—as Exum, for example, does over some pages in her *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, pp. 122-26 (e.g. 'One could hardly imagine a more thoroughgoing success story' [p. 126]). The point rather is that our contemporary models of masculinity prompt us to foreground certain textual materials rather than others.

⁵³. J.M. Myers, 'David', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. George Arthur Buttrick; Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), I, pp. 771-82 (781-82).

⁵⁴. Howard, 'David', in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, I, pp. 41-48 (48).

sin'. That is to say, for the commentator the sin is swallowed up in the repentance. David's success in repentance becomes more important than his failure in sin, so even his failure becomes an arena of his success.

A final example, with a more pious turn of phrase, if that were possible, comes from *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*:

[David's] accomplishments were many and varied; man of action, poet, tender lover, generous foe, stern dispenser of justice, loyal friend, he was all that men find wholesome and admirable in man, and this by the will of God, who shaped him for his destiny.⁵⁵

In brief, for these commentators, everything questionable, distasteful and gross about David has been swallowed up by the modern myth of masculinity: if he is a real man, he has to be successful.

3. *Warfare*

We have seen how prominent in the construction of David's masculinity is his ability and desire for fighting and killing. Modern masculinity approves of aggression, and it is striking that our commentators never say a word against David on this score. On the other hand, since being a biblical scholar and a mafia boss at one and the same time would create an uncomfortable conflict in their own male identities, they are diffident at positively approving of David's perpetual taking of life. So they have two strategies of containment for their anxiety on this score: either they suppress the warrior David or they transform the aggression of the man of blood into the assertiveness of the decisive, problem-solving executive or tycoon.

Both strategies are evident (if you know to look for them) in the article on David by Jan Fokkelman in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*.⁵⁶ His concluding and summary paragraph begins: 'David was not only a very powerful leader and personality as both soldier and statesman, he was also a first-class poet... The court established by him...gave a tremendous spiritual and literary

⁵⁵. Jones, 'David', in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, I, pp. 364-69 (369).

⁵⁶. Jan P. Fokkelman, 'David', in *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (ed. Paul J. Achtemeier; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 208-11.

impulse to the literature of biblical Israel.' And so on, until it concludes, 'And the poems of David live on in the liturgy of Jewish and Christian communities, sung to this very day'. David then is what his significance is, and his significance is what endures to this very day. Of course, he was a 'soldier'—but not in the sense of killing lots of men, but in the sense of being a leader as a soldier, of being a statesman in much the same sense, and certainly in the same breath, as being a soldier. Of course he was aggressive, but only in the sense of being 'a very powerful leader and personality'—not in the sense of murdering messengers and killing Philistines for the fun of it. Elsewhere in the article also there is the same squeamishness about actual killing. There is indeed a reference to his 'courage and leadership in regular skirmishes with the Philistines', but that phrase 'regular skirmishes' makes it sound more like football fixtures than hit-and-run slayings, like good clean fun in which no one gets hurt rather than the bloody taking of human life. And there is a reference also to the fact that David 'became a war lord with his own army of outlaws and performed services of protection', as if the special function of a 'war lord' is the provision of security. The profile of David's masculinity in the text has been overlaid and obscured by Fokkelman's.

Another example is to be found in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, where the author, David F. Payne, concludes that David was 'supremely able in the military and political spheres' and that '[h]is successes were a tribute to his personal courage, and to his ability as soldier and statesman'. 'While his adultery and murder [of Uriah] cannot be condoned, with this glaring exception he was in every way the ideal ruler.'⁵⁷ One might be forgiven for thinking that the writer not only condones but actually approves of David's slaughters and indiscriminate killings, for in every way, he says, with but one glaring exception, David is the ideal ruler.

4. Beauty

There is some discomfort in the commentators over male beauty.

⁵⁷ David F. Payne, 'David', in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; fully revised edition, Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1979), I, pp. 870-76 (876).

None of the English translations or the commentators will actually bring themselves to speaking of 'beauty' in a man.⁵⁸ Their culture enables them only to think of 'good looks' or 'handsomeness' in a man, for 'beauty' is, for them, a female characteristic. To be a man is to be different in every respect from a woman, even linguistically if possible.

And there are other ways of expressing this discomfort as well. McCarter says curtly: 'The quality [of 'good looks', as he calls it] is to be interpreted as a physical symptom of divine favor'⁵⁹—as if he can accept male beauty only as a feature of the text that stands in need of 'interpretation', only if it is a symbol for something else. It is strange too that he calls it a 'symptom', as if it were a medical condition. Ackroyd too wants to stress that 'good appearance' is seen as a divine gift⁶⁰—as if its real significance were theological.

Another way of handling the discomfort is to make no comment on the texts that speak of male beauty. A.R.S. Kennedy, for example, says nothing about any of the texts except to suggest that David's 'ruddiness' may refer to his hair colour⁶¹ and to curl his lip at 2 Sam. 14.25-27 as '[a] paragraph of later date eulogizing Absalom's personal beauty'.⁶²

Yet another mode of commenting is to naturalize the Hebrew terminology to an acceptable code of the commentator's time. Thus Ackroyd, for example, reckons that 'handsome' (NEB) at 1 Sam. 16.1, used of David, is better translated 'a man of presence'.⁶³ The NEB itself actually says of Saul at 1 Sam. 9.2 that 'there was no better man among the Israelites than he', and Ackroyd remarks that 'better' 'may indicate moral quality, but the phrases following suggest superiority of physical appearance'.⁶⁴

⁵⁸. Kennedy, *Samuel*, p. 261, gives the lie to that generalization, but since his book is almost a hundred years old, perhaps it is not representative of the 'modern' West.

⁵⁹. McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 173.

⁶⁰. Ackroyd, *1 Samuel*, p. 75. David's beauty is 'good appearance' also on p. 133.

⁶¹. Kennedy, *Samuel*, p. 118.

⁶². Kennedy, *Samuel*, p. 261.

⁶³. Ackroyd, *1 Samuel*, p. 135.

⁶⁴. Ackroyd, *1 Samuel*, p. 75.

McKane is something of an exception among commentators in not only noting but also urging his readers to note ‘the emphasis [in 1 Sam. 9.2] on Saul’s physical attractiveness and superb physique’,⁶⁵ but that is only place in his brief commentary where the subject of male beauty is allowed to raise its head. On the whole, David’s beauty, and therewith the very idea of male beauty in general, is suppressed in the commentaries by the modern ideology of masculinity.

5. Sex

Here is the site of another set of conflicts. David has intercourse with twenty women, at least, but he is not very interested in sex. The only appreciative thing he says about love sounds homo-erotic, especially because it explicitly displaces women as the object of male affection: ‘I am desolate for you, Jonathan my brother. Very dear you were to me, your love more wonderful to me than the love of a woman’ (NJB); ‘Your love for me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women’ (2 Sam. 1.26 REB); ‘[M]ost dear have you been to me; [m]ore precious have I held love for you than love for women’ (NAB). Faced with David’s sexual practice and his sexual interests, commentators find themselves in a fix. Writing for church presses and Christian sensibilities (for the most part), they feel obliged to uphold monogamous heterosexuality as the norm, while their own culture scripts them to regard sex as critical and foundational for masculinity. Given the textual evidence, how are they to construct and represent David on sex? What sort of a man is he, and how does his masculinity implicitly trouble the commentators’ own masculinity?

Take Kyle McCarter, and let him speak for commentators everywhere. Wherever the language of love between Jonathan and David crops up in the narrative,⁶⁶ McCarter hastens to

⁶⁵ William McKane, *I and II Samuel: Introduction and Commentary* (Torch Bible Commentaries; London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 69.

⁶⁶ I refer to 1 Sam. 18.1; 20.17; 2 Sam. 1.26 (though not 1 Sam. 19.1, where the Hebrew is *pn*, which means no more than ‘deeply fond’ in McCarter’s translation [*I Samuel*, p. 320]; most of the rest of us think that it means ‘delight in’, ‘take pleasure in’, but it’s a bit ripe having men ‘delight in’ other men, isn’t it?).

assure us that it has a political connotation.⁶⁷ To be sure, it ‘describes personal affection’,⁶⁸ and Jonathan ‘is so taken with David that he becomes vitally devoted to him in affection and loyalty’,⁶⁹ and ‘Jonathan’s deep affection for David is a part of the close relationship that has developed between the two young men; also it is surely a sign of the irresistible charm of the man who has Yahweh’s favor’.⁷⁰ Oh yes, and there was ‘also’ ‘warm personal intimacy in the relationship between the two men’—that ‘also’ signifying: as well as the political implications, which were more important. What we should not forget, says McCarter, is that ‘In the ancient Near East “love” terminology belonged to the language of political discourse, and many of the statements made about Jonathan’s love for David are charged with political overtones’.⁷¹ In a word, says McCarter, banish from your mind any thought of sex when you read of Jonathan’s love: it is essentially political, and though there was also a warm personal ‘affection’, there was absolutely nothing more, honest. There is no recognition in this commentator that the David and Jonathan of 1 Samuel cannot be described as ‘just good friends’; even if they are not lovers in our sense, they are certainly one another’s ‘significant other’—in the early days, at least. In that context, the question of sex *has* to be raised, one would have

⁶⁷. McCarter depends for this point upon J.A. Thompson’s article, ‘The Significance of the Verb *Love* in the Jonathan–David Narratives in 1 Samuel’, *Vetus Testamentum* 24 (1974), pp. 34-38. But of course the meaning of ‘love’ in a formal treaty context (cf. also W.L. Moran, ‘The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy’, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 [1963], pp. 77-87 [78-79]) will hardly be relevant for the term in this narrative of personal relationships.

⁶⁸. They are ‘close friends’, says Peter D. Miscall, charmingly (*1 Samuel: A Literary Reading* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986], p. 130).

⁶⁹. McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 305.

⁷⁰. McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 342.

⁷¹. P. Kyle McCarter, Jr, *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (Anchor Bible, 9; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), p. 77. If love ‘belonged’ to the language of political discourse, readers may note, presumably wives, husbands, parents, children, courting couples and the like only ever ‘borrowed’ (perhaps ‘stole’?) it.

thought, even if it is to be laid to rest.⁷² But it is not, because the commentator's construction of masculinity has no room for the homoerotic, and David is nothing if he is not a 'real man'.⁷³

How does David's polygamy fare then? Not a word from McCarter on the ten 'concubines' who are left to guard the house when David flees before Absalom (2 Sam. 15.16; 16.21) except to say that 'By claiming the royal harem Abishalom publicizes his claim to the throne'⁷⁴—as if Absalom had put an advertisement in *The Times* announcing his royal pretensions, rather than undertaking, in a bizarre act of sexual athleticism and exhibitionism, to have sex with one after another of David's ten secondary wives in a tent pitched on the roof 'in the sight of all Israel' (2 Sam. 16.22). Polygamy and multiple rape are the unacceptable faces of heterosexuality in the modern West, so the least said about ancient males' deviation from modern norms the better. The commentator, who is no doubt a liberal intellectual, if not even a 'new man' as well, displays a quite uncanny reticence about the grotesque and the gross in this narrative, and in so doing naturalizes the biblical text. In passing no remark upon the harem system or the ethics of multiple rape the commentator affects not to have noticed something nasty in the text; or, having noticed it, judges that there is nothing to be said about it. The

⁷². The distinction between male friendship and homosexuality, though always problematic, has been clearly enough recognized in other ages than our own; cf. for example Alan Bray, 'Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England', *History Workshop* 29 (1990), pp. 1-19.

⁷³. Perhaps the message that 'real men' read here is that male friendship is dangerous; cf. Philip Culbertson, *New Adam: The Future of Male Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 90. Not everyone operates with the distinction of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, between the homosocial, which includes all same-sex relations, and the homosexual, which denotes only that segment of the homosocial that is distinguished by genital sexuality (*Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1985]). I mean that most people are not aware how important such a distinction is; there are also those, of course, who are aware of it but do not accept it (cf. Robert K. Martin, *Hero, Captain and Stranger: Male Friendship, Social Critique, and Literary Form in the Sea Novels of Herman Melville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 13.

⁷⁴. McCarter, *II Samuel*, p. 384.

behaviour of a David or an Absalom is thereby naturalized and normalized, and the representation of masculinity in the text is harmonized to our modern consciousness.

In a word, and metacommentatingly, I conclude: Once again, we see that the function of commentary on biblical texts has been to familiarize the Bible, to normalize it to our own cultural standards, to render it as undisturbing as possible, to press it into the service of a different worldview; eventually, the effect will be to write the Bible out of existence. That is what has been happening to the Bible in the church, in my opinion,⁷⁵ and it is no doubt what happens to the Bible in any culture. I suppose it is what happens to old books anywhere, and it is the task of scholars, taking a step of critical distance as best they can from their own culture and their personal scripts, to bring back into the foreground the otherness of the familiarized.⁷⁶

⁷⁵. See my forthcoming book, *The Bible and the Modern World* (The Didsbury Lectures; Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1995), Chapter 4 'The Bible and the Church', where I present some empirical evidence for this claim.

⁷⁶. I should like to thank my colleague Cheryl Exum for advising me that this was the next paper I should write, though I doubt that it has turned out as she would have imagined it, and Francis Landy for a typically generous and thought-provoking series of comments on a draft of the chapter (I incorporated all I could, and tried to fend off the others).