

2 SAMUEL

R O B E R T B A R R O N



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To Jim and Molly Perry,
Heroes of the New Evangelization

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing this book was a joy. Though I have long been a student of the Bible, most of my published work has been in the fields of philosophy, theology, and spirituality. To delve deeply, therefore, into the text of 2 Samuel itself, as well as to explore the rich and fascinating tradition of commentary upon it, both ancient and modern, was thrilling and illuminating.

For giving me the opportunity to roam through at least this small corner of the biblical world, I am very grateful to Rusty Reno, the general editor of the Brazos series. I am also deeply indebted to Jack Thornton, who helped enormously with the research required to finish this project. Jack's patience, diligence, and concentration throughout the lengthy process were impressive indeed. I want to thank as well Brandon Vogt, who read the text with great care and who was an indispensable help in getting it into publishable shape. A word of gratitude also to Prof. Robert Louis Wilken, Fr. Robert Schoenstene, and Dr. Matthew Levering, all of whom read the manuscript and made extremely helpful suggestions for its improvement. I want, finally, to express my thanks to my good friend Fr. Stephen Grunow, who thought through this project with me from beginning to end and made the book far better than it would have been without his wise guidance.

SERIES PREFACE

Near the beginning of his treatise against Gnostic interpretations of the Bible, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus observes that scripture is like a great mosaic depicting a handsome king. It is as if we were owners of a villa in Gaul who had ordered a mosaic from Rome. It arrives, and the beautifully colored tiles need to be taken out of their packaging and put into proper order according to the plan of the artist. The difficulty, of course, is that scripture provides us with the individual pieces, but the order and sequence of various elements are not obvious. The Bible does not come with instructions that would allow interpreters to simply place verses, episodes, images, and parables in order as a worker might follow a schematic drawing in assembling the pieces to depict the handsome king. The mosaic must be puzzled out. This is precisely the work of scriptural interpretation.

Origen has his own image to express the difficulty of working out the proper approach to reading the Bible. When preparing to offer a commentary on the Psalms he tells of a tradition handed down to him by his Hebrew teacher:

The Hebrew said that the whole divinely inspired scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in our house. By each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open. We therefore know the scriptures that are obscure only by taking the points of departure for understanding them from another place because they have their interpretive principle scattered among them.¹

1. Fragment from the preface to *Commentary on Psalms 1–25*, preserved in the *Philokalia*, trans. Joseph W. Trigg (London: Routledge, 1998), 70–71.

As is the case for Irenaeus, scriptural interpretation is not purely local. The key in Genesis may best fit the door of Isaiah, which in turn opens up the meaning of Matthew. The mosaic must be put together with an eye toward the overall plan.

Irenaeus, Origen, and the great cloud of premodern biblical interpreters assumed that puzzling out the mosaic of scripture must be a communal project. The Bible is vast, heterogeneous, full of confusing passages and obscure words, and difficult to understand. Only a fool would imagine that he or she could work out solutions alone. The way forward must rely upon a tradition of reading that Irenaeus reports has been passed on as the rule or canon of truth that functions as a confession of faith. “Anyone,” he says, “who keeps unchangeable in himself the rule of truth received through baptism will recognize the names and sayings and parables of the scriptures.”² Modern scholars debate the content of the rule on which Irenaeus relies and commends, not the least because the terms and formulations Irenaeus himself uses shift and slide. Nonetheless, Irenaeus assumes that there is a body of apostolic doctrine sustained by a tradition of teaching in the church. This doctrine provides the clarifying principles that guide exegetical judgment toward a coherent overall reading of scripture as a unified witness. Doctrine, then, is the schematic drawing that will allow the reader to organize the vast heterogeneity of the words, images, and stories of the Bible into a readable, coherent whole. It is the rule that guides us toward the proper matching of keys to doors.

If self-consciousness about the role of history in shaping human consciousness makes modern historical-critical study critical, then what makes modern study of the Bible modern is the consensus that classical Christian doctrine distorts interpretive understanding. Benjamin Jowett, the influential nineteenth-century English classical scholar, is representative. In his programmatic essay “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” he exhorts the biblical reader to disengage from doctrine and break its hold over the interpretive imagination. “The simple words of that book,” writes Jowett of the modern reader, “he tries to preserve absolutely pure from the refinements or distinctions of later times.” The modern interpreter wishes to “clear away the remains of dogmas, systems, controversies, which are encrusted upon” the words of scripture. The disciplines of close philological analysis “would enable us to separate the elements of doctrine and tradition with which the meaning of scripture is encumbered in our own day.”³ The lens of understanding must be wiped clear of the hazy and distorting film of doctrine.

2. *Against Heresies* 9.4.

3. Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), 338–39.

Postmodernity, in turn, has encouraged us to criticize the critics. Jowett imagined that when he wiped away doctrine he would encounter the biblical text in its purity and uncover what he called “the original spirit and intention of the authors.”⁴ We are not now so sanguine, and the postmodern mind thinks interpretive frameworks inevitable. Nonetheless, we tend to remain modern in at least one sense. We read Athanasius and think him stage-managing the diversity of scripture to support his positions against the Arians. We read Bernard of Clairvaux and assume that his monastic ideals structure his reading of the Song of Songs. In the wake of the Reformation, we can see how the doctrinal divisions of the time shaped biblical interpretation. Luther famously described the Epistle of James as a “strawy letter,” for, as he said, “it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.”⁵ In these and many other instances, often written in the heat of ecclesiastical controversy or out of the passion of ascetic commitment, we tend to think Jowett correct: doctrine is a distorting film on the lens of understanding.

However, is what we commonly think actually the case? Are readers naturally perceptive? Do we have an unblemished, reliable aptitude for the divine? Have we no need for disciplines of vision? Do our attention and judgment need to be trained, especially as we seek to read scripture as the living word of God? According to Augustine, we all struggle to journey toward God, who is our rest and peace. Yet our vision is darkened and the fetters of worldly habit corrupt our judgment. We need training and instruction in order to cleanse our minds so that we might find our way toward God.⁶ To this end, “the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine Providence for our salvation.”⁷ The covenant with Israel, the coming of Christ, the gathering of the nations into the church—all these things are gathered up into the rule of faith, and they guide the vision and form of the soul toward the end of fellowship with God. In Augustine’s view, the reading of scripture both contributes to and benefits from this divine pedagogy. With countless variations in both exegetical conclusions and theological frameworks, the same pedagogy of a doctrinally ruled reading of scripture characterizes the broad sweep of the Christian tradition from Gregory the Great through Bernard and Bonaventure, continuing across Reformation differences in both John Calvin and Cornelius Lapse, Patrick Henry and Bishop Bossuet, and on to more recent figures such as Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

4. *Ibid.*, 340.

5. *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 362.

6. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.10.

7. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.35.

Is doctrine, then, not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the Bible, but instead a clarifying agent, an enduring tradition of theological judgments that amplifies the living voice of scripture? And what of the scholarly dispassion advocated by Jowett? Is a noncommitted reading, an interpretation unprejudiced, the way toward objectivity, or does it simply invite the languid intellectual apathy that stands aside to make room for the false truism and easy answers of the age?

This series of biblical commentaries was born out of the conviction that dogma clarifies rather than obscures. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible advances upon the assumption that the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian scripture. God the Father Almighty, who sends his only begotten Son to die for us and for our salvation and who raises the crucified Son in the power of the Holy Spirit so that the baptized may be joined in one body—faith in *this* God with *this* vocation of love for the world is the lens through which to view the heterogeneity and particularity of the biblical texts. Doctrine, then, is not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the meaning of the Bible. It is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds fogged by self-deceptions, a challenge to our languid intellectual apathy that will too often rest in false truisms and the easy spiritual nostrums of the present age rather than search more deeply and widely for the dispersed keys to the many doors of scripture.

For this reason, the commentators in this series have not been chosen because of their historical or philological expertise. In the main, they are not biblical scholars in the conventional, modern sense of the term. Instead, the commentators were chosen because of their knowledge of and expertise in using the Christian doctrinal tradition. They are qualified by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits, for it is the conceit of this series of biblical commentaries that theological training in the Nicene tradition prepares one for biblical interpretation, and thus it is to theologians and not biblical scholars that we have turned. “War is too important,” it has been said, “to leave to the generals.”

We do hope, however, that readers do not draw the wrong impression. The Nicene tradition does not provide a set formula for the solution of exegetical problems. The great tradition of Christian doctrine was not transcribed, bound in folio, and issued in an official, critical edition. We have the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, used for centuries in many traditions of Christian worship. We have ancient baptismal affirmations of faith. The Chalcedonian definition and the creeds and canons of other church councils have their places in official church documents. Yet the rule of faith cannot be limited to a specific set of words, sentences, and

creeds. It is instead a pervasive habit of thought, the animating culture of the church in its intellectual aspect. As Augustine observed, commenting on Jer. 31:33, “The creed is learned by listening; it is written, not on stone tablets nor on any material, but on the heart.”⁸ This is why Irenaeus is able to appeal to the rule of faith more than a century before the first ecumenical council, and this is why we need not itemize the contents of the Nicene tradition in order to appeal to its potency and role in the work of interpretation.

Because doctrine is intrinsically fluid on the margins and most powerful as a habit of mind rather than a list of propositions, this commentary series cannot settle difficult questions of method and content at the outset. The editors of the series impose no particular method of doctrinal interpretation. We cannot say in advance how doctrine helps the Christian reader assemble the mosaic of scripture. We have no clear answer to the question of whether exegesis guided by doctrine is antithetical to or compatible with the now-old modern methods of historical-critical inquiry. Truth—historical, mathematical, or doctrinal—knows no contradiction. But method is a discipline of vision and judgment, and we cannot know in advance what aspects of historical-critical inquiry are functions of modernism that shape the soul to be at odds with Christian discipline. Still further, the editors do not hold the commentators to any particular hermeneutical theory that specifies how to define the plain sense of scripture—or the role this plain sense should play in interpretation. Here the commentary series is tentative and exploratory.

Can we proceed in any other way? European and North American intellectual culture has been de-Christianized. The effect has not been a cessation of Christian activity. Theological work continues. Sermons are preached. Biblical scholars turn out monographs. Church leaders have meetings. But each dimension of a formerly unified Christian practice now tends to function independently. It is as if a weakened army had been fragmented, and various corps had retreated to isolated fortresses in order to survive. Theology has lost its competence in exegesis. Scripture scholars function with minimal theological training. Each decade finds new theories of preaching to cover the nakedness of seminary training that provides theology without exegesis and exegesis without theology.

Not the least of the causes of the fragmentation of Christian intellectual practice has been the divisions of the church. Since the Reformation, the role of the rule of faith in interpretation has been obscured by polemics and counterpolemics about

8. *Sermon 212.2.*

sola scriptura and the necessity of a magisterial teaching authority. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series is deliberately ecumenical in scope, because the editors are convinced that early church fathers were correct: church doctrine does not compete with scripture in a limited economy of epistemic authority. We wish to encourage unashamedly dogmatic interpretation of scripture, confident that the concrete consequences of such a reading will cast far more light on the great divisive questions of the Reformation than either reengaging in old theological polemics or chasing the fantasy of a pure exegesis that will somehow adjudicate between competing theological positions. You shall know the truth of doctrine by its interpretive fruits, and therefore in hopes of contributing to the unity of the church, we have deliberately chosen a wide range of theologians whose commitment to doctrine will allow readers to see real interpretive consequences rather than the shadow boxing of theological concepts.

The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible has no dog in the current translation fights, and we endorse a textual ecumenism that parallels our diversity of ecclesial backgrounds. We do not impose the thankfully modest inclusive-language agenda of the New Revised Standard Version, nor do we insist upon the glories of the Authorized Version, nor do we require our commentators to create a new translation. In our communal worship, in our private devotions, in our theological scholarship, we use a range of scriptural translations. Precisely as scripture—a living, functioning text in the present life of faith—the Bible is not semantically fixed. Only a modernist, literalist hermeneutic could imagine that this modest fluidity is a liability. Philological precision and stability is a consequence of, not a basis for, exegesis. Judgments about the meaning of a text fix its literal sense, not the other way around. As a result, readers should expect an eclectic use of biblical translations, both across the different volumes of the series and within individual commentaries.

We cannot speak for contemporary biblical scholars, but as theologians we know that we have long been trained to defend our fortresses of theological concepts and formulations. And we have forgotten the skills of interpretation. Like stroke victims, we must rehabilitate our exegetical imaginations, and there are likely to be different strategies of recovery. Readers should expect this reconstructive—not reactionary—series to provide them with experiments in postcritical doctrinal interpretation, not commentaries written according to the settled principles of a well-functioning tradition. Some commentators will follow classical typological and allegorical readings from the premodern tradition; others will draw on contemporary historical study. Some will comment verse by verse; others will

highlight passages, even single words that trigger theological analysis of scripture. No reading strategies are proscribed, no interpretive methods foresworn. The central premise in this commentary series is that doctrine provides structure and cogency to scriptural interpretation. We trust in this premise with the hope that the Nicene tradition can guide us, however imperfectly, diversely, and haltingly, toward a reading of scripture in which the right keys open the right doors.

R. R. Reno

INTRODUCTION

The figure of King David has beguiled painters, poets, musicians, artists, and spiritual writers up and down the centuries. To appreciate the hold of this character on the imagination, one has only to think of the sculptures of David by Donatello, Michelangelo, and Bernini, paintings of David by Rembrandt and Chagall, literary portraits of the Israelite king by figures as diverse as John Dryden, Joseph Heller, and Robert Pinsky, and musical celebrations of David from Handel to Leonard Cohen. What accounts for this fascination? With the possible exception of Jesus himself, David is the most fully developed character in the Bible. The author of the “Samuel literature” (a term I will use throughout this commentary to designate the books of 1 and 2 Samuel construed as one text) allows us to see almost the entire arc of David’s life, from his boyhood preoccupations with the flock of his father, Jesse, through his adventure with Goliath, his struggle with Saul, his ascention to power as king, his establishment of empire, his terrible moral failing, his humiliation by his son Absalom, and his painful and conflicted old age. No other figure in the Old Testament—neither Abraham nor Jacob nor Moses nor Isaiah nor Jeremiah—is characterized with such thoroughness and psychological perceptiveness. I find myself in agreement with Robert Pinsky’s rejoinder to those who would suggest that David is but a literary invention. The former poet laureate of the United States argues that a story as textured and psychologically credible as David’s can only be grounded in a very real person vividly remembered.⁹

Moreover, King David is one of the most pivotal persons in the entire corpus of scripture. He is the terminus of a trajectory that runs from Adam through Noah,

9. Robert Pinsky, *The Life of David* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 4.

Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, and Samuel. Many of God's promises to those patriarchal and prophetic figures seem to come to fulfillment in David's rule over a united Israel. At the same time, David looks beyond himself to a new David, one who would definitively fulfill what he himself left incomplete and unfinished. In a word, he is perhaps *the* cardinal point on which the biblical revelation turns both backward and forward.

One of the themes that emerges most clearly in 2 Samuel is that of kingship. On the biblical reading, the bad rule of Adam in the garden led to the disaster of the fall, and ever since that calamity, humanity has been in search of right rule. At the heart of the Old Testament sensibility is the conviction that God chose a people, Israel, whom he would shape according to his own mind and heart so that they might draw all of humanity into right relationship with God. Hence, they would be a kingly people. But this holy nation would endure only in the measure that they themselves were rightly ruled, and therefore the search for a righteous and godly king of Israel—an Adam who would properly govern a reconstituted Eden—became a preoccupation for biblical Israel. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Judah, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Samson, and Samuel were all, after a manner of speaking, kings of Israel, but they ruled to varying degrees of adequacy. Having united the northern and southern tribes, established his fortified capital at Jerusalem, and subdued the enemies of Israel, David emerged as the most stirring and successful king of Israel.

Adam was not only a king; he was also a priest, which is to say, someone who affects a mystical union between divinity and humanity. After him, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, and Samuel were also, to varying degrees of intensity, priests. Wearing the sacred vestment of the priesthood and dancing before the ark of the covenant, King David emerged as David the high priest and hence recapitulated and brought to full expression the priesthood of the work of his predecessors. Samuel's anointing of David the shepherd boy could thus be seen as both a kingly and priestly designation. When the first followers of Jesus referred to him as *Christos* (anointed), they were appreciating him as David in full. The Christian reader will thus see in David the most compelling anticipation of Jesus, the definitive priest-king. Though this sort of move is always hermeneutically dangerous, one could make a good case that the most important interpretive key for the New Testament is found in the seventh chapter of 2 Samuel: Nathan's prophecy that the line of David would never fail and that a descendant of David would reign forever. Not only did this prophecy haunt the biblical tradition that followed it—look especially here at the prophets and the Psalms—but it also

decidedly influenced the manner in which the Gospel writers came to understand the significance of Jesus.

Still another central motif of 2 Samuel is that of bad fathering and bad kingship. David is presented as Israel's greatest, indeed archetypal, king, and at the same time his flaws are on clear, often disturbing, display. As many point out, ancient authors tend to apotheosize political rulers, but the writer/editor of 2 Samuel, even as he extols David as a uniquely privileged agent of the divine purpose, ruthlessly exposes the king's moral and political failures. David is indeed a new Adam ruling a restored Eden, but he is also, ethically and spiritually, a descendant of the Adam who allowed the garden to be compromised by the serpent. In this, he stands in the tradition of Eli and sets the tone for the long line of his decadent and wicked successors as king of Israel, bad governors who would preside over the splintering of the people and the weakening of the nation. This is another way of signaling that Israel, even as it celebrates David, has to await another king.

The theme in 2 Samuel that I take to be most basic theologically is that of the noncompetitive transcendence of God. One of the distinctive marks of this text is that Yahweh rarely acts in a direct and interruptive way, involving himself as one competitive cause among many. Instead God is consistently portrayed as acting noninvasively through a bevy of ordinary and secondary agents. The events described in 2 Samuel could, almost without exception, be explained easily enough through recourse to psychological or political categories, and yet the author clearly supposes that God is, through it all, definitively working his purposes out. This noncompetitive co-agency of God and human beings represents a major breakthrough in the religious consciousness of Israel and thus makes 2 Samuel a milestone in the evolution of that consciousness. What grounds it, at least implicitly, is a keen sense of God as the Creator of the universe and not an agent or element within the universe. Were God simply one being, however supreme, among many, then he would stand over and against other worldly things, jockeying with them on the same metaphysical plane. But as the Creator of all finite things, God can relate to particular agents in a nonintrusive manner, acting through them but not violating their own causal integrity. God is certainly other, but he is, if I may borrow the language of Kathryn Tanner, "otherly-other"; this very strangeness is what allows him to operate in and with human agents.¹⁰ We will see this dynamic over and over in the course of 2 Samuel.

10. Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 12.

When was this text written and by whom? The answers to both questions, unfortunately, are elusive. Most contemporary scholars more or less follow the suggestion made by Martin Noth in the 1940s that 1–2 Samuel comprise, along with the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and 1–2 Kings, a coherent historical and theological narrative. This suggests, of course, that they were written, or at least edited, essentially by one author. To be sure, every one of the texts in question includes elements from a variety of sources, but the Noth hypothesis proposes that a fundamental thematic, literary, and theological unity obtains across these books. But who this author was no one knows to any degree of certainty. The numerous allusions that he makes to other texts within the Hebrew biblical tradition imply that he was trained in the context of a fairly sophisticated theological and literary culture. This in turn indicates that he was probably writing at a time of relative peace and after the Hebrew religious worldview had reached a high degree of maturity and complexity. Both of these conditions suggest that he was operating in the early Second Temple period following the return of the exiles from Babylon. Of course, the vividly detailed descriptions of the Davidic court in 2 Samuel have led others to speculate that the author is a much earlier figure, someone far closer to David's own time. Since my purpose here is properly theological commentary, I will leave these historical and literary speculations to the specialists.

What we call 1 and 2 Samuel were originally one text, and they appear as such in most Jewish Bibles to the present day. The division into two—largely a result of the length of scroll available to scribes—took place at the time of the Septuagint translation into Greek and was later adopted by most Latin translators of the sacred scriptures. In his Vulgate translation, Jerome refers to 1 Samuel as the *Primum Regum* (the First of the Kings) and 2 Samuel as *Secundum Regum* (the Second of the Kings). For the purpose of literary and theological commentary, therefore, it would be artificial in the extreme to treat 1 and 2 Samuel as two discrete texts. Common themes, literary devices, allusive patterns, and so forth abound.

When one considers the extraordinary number of memorable passages in 2 Samuel—David's elegy to Saul and Jonathan, the king's dance before the ark, the jealousy of Michal, the seduction of Bathsheba and its dreadful aftermath, Nathan's "Thou art the man!," the rape of Tamar, the rebellion of Absalom, David's lament over his fallen son—and when one takes in the literary complexity, theological depth, and psychological insight contained in its pages, it is difficult not to agree with Robert Alter's contention that 2 Samuel is one of the most impressive texts to come down to us from the ancient world.

SERIES ONE

 **DAVID COMES
TO POWER** 

2 SAMUEL 1

Although the division of the original text into two books at this point is, as I indicated above, a consequence of the length of scrolls available to the scribe, it is nevertheless significant that this major portion of the story commences with a mention of the death of Saul: “After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag” (2 Sam. 1:1). First, this brings the text into line with both the book of Joshua and the book of Judges, which similarly commence with a reference to the death of famous figures, Moses and Joshua respectively. If, as seems likely, the Samuel literature is an ingredient in the work of the editor known as the Deuteronomistic Historian, then this device indicates a sort of trajectory leading from the conquest of the promised land conducted by Joshua through the era of the judges to the establishment of David as king of a united Israel (Polzin 1993: 1). Second, the reference to the death of Saul draws attention to what is perhaps the dominant theme of 2 Samuel: contrast between the kingly path taken by Saul and that taken by David. The particularly ignominious death of Saul—by his own hand, surrounded by his enemies, and abandoned by Yahweh—is presented as the consequence of certain disastrous moves and decisions he made. It therefore sets the stage for the sharply contrasting picture of David’s kingship that will emerge in the course of 2 Samuel. Does Israel require a king? What makes a king good or bad? How does the kingship of Yahweh relate to human kingship? These are among the questions that principally preoccupy the author of the text under consideration (Beale 2011: 65–66).

Even a relatively adequate treatment of this issue requires a return to the very beginning of the Bible, to the accounts of creation and the garden of Eden. The

stately liturgical language that marks the opening of the book of Genesis is meant to demonstrate the lordship of God over all things and, consequently, the dethronement of any false claimants to such absolute authority. God creates the sun, moon, stars, all the animals that walk upon the earth, and all the fish that swim in the sea. In many of the cultures that surrounded ancient Israel, all of those things were, at various times and to varying degrees, worshiped. By relegating them to the level of creatures, the author of Genesis is suggesting, none too subtly, that authentic cosmic kingship belongs to the Creator God alone. Finally, as the crown of his creation, God brings forth human beings: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth’” (Gen. 1:26). To be sure, human beings had become, in some cultures, objects of worship; one needs only to think of the variety of deified kings on offer in the ancient world. Therefore, portraying the human being as a creature of the one God certainly undermines all attempts to turn humans into gods (Beale 2011: 30–32).

But there is more here than a mere cautioning against ego inflation, for the first humans are presented not simply as servants but as viceroys of the supreme king, God. Their purpose is precisely to have dominion over the various other things that God has made, ruling, as it were, as kings in the name of the supreme king. In fact, this stewardship of creation is a function of the first humans having been made “in the image of God.” Just as God cares for and delights in the things he has fashioned, so his vice-regents are given the task of “tilling” and “keeping” the garden in which God placed them. The use of those terms of cultivation should preclude any temptation to interpret “dominion” as domination or oppression. In these very first verses of the scripture, an affirmation of the kingship of the Creator can be found, as well as a concomitant affirmation that it pleases God to involve his human creatures in a kind of kingly fellowship, granting to them the privilege and responsibility of tending the garden in line with God’s purposes. According to a standard rabbinic reading of this passage, the point of Adam’s kingship was to expand the boundaries of the garden of Eden until it contained the whole world. His good stewardship was meant to turn all of creation, both human and nonhuman, into a place of order and harmony. Part of this task was epistemological and philosophical, an act of “cataloging” creation, naming it *kata logon* after the intelligibility placed in it by the Creator. Thus, the early interpreters saw Adam as the first scientist, the first philosopher, exercising a sort

of intellectual kingship. Tilling the soil, naming the animals, and walking in easy fellowship with God, Adam functioned as a good king, mimicking the moves and instantiating the purposes of the Creator King. From these earliest verses of the Bible, a theme runs like a golden thread through the whole of the scripture: dynamic incarnationalism. God is the Lord of creation, but he delights in allowing humanity to participate in his lordship and thereby brings the created order to its proper fulfillment.

But all does not go swimmingly with the Adamic kingship, and the fall of the first king (and his consort) from grace establishes the tension between good and bad rule that marks almost the entirety of the biblical narrative (Beale 2011: 46). Part of the task of a king is to cultivate the realm under his jurisdiction, but another dimension of his leadership is the protection of his kingdom from deleterious outside influence. The third chapter of the book of Genesis commences with a reference to “the serpent” who was “more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made” (Gen. 3:1). Adam and Eve not only allow this dangerous figure into the garden; they also listened to him and obeyed him, taking his suggestion and ignoring the command of God (Beale 2011: 35). In this they demonstrate the opposite of dominion, allowing a negative power to have lordship over them. The result of their failed leadership is a compromising of the order and harmony that obtained within them and within the garden. The first indication that all is not well is that they hide from God: “They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden” (Gen. 3:8). Since the human king is meant to operate in concord with the dictates of the divine king, the clearest sign of dysfunctional human kingship is a rupture with God, a refusal by the earthly king to allow the divine to become incarnate in his concrete moves and decisions. In the immediate wake of their sin, Adam and Eve become aware of their nakedness, and this causes them shame, signaling a disconnect between their spiritual and physical natures. This interior disintegration is followed by a falling apart at the communal and interpersonal levels: “The man said, ‘The woman whom you have to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.’ . . . The woman said, ‘The serpent tricked me, and I ate’” (Gen. 3:12–13). God’s expulsion of the failed king and queen from the garden ought to be interpreted not as capricious divine punishment but rather as an expression of a kind of karmic law, the inevitable consequence of bad leadership. The expulsion from the garden might best be read as the dissolution of the kingdom around them once they sought to rule without reference to God.

In the chapters of Genesis that immediately follow the story of the fall, ample evidence can be found of bad kingly leadership. Cain allows sin to have dominion over him and consequently slays his brother. Then this paradigmatically wicked king becomes the founder of cities: “Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and named it Enoch after his son Enoch” (Gen. 4:17). The rather clear implication is that the dysfunction of virtually every human community represents a falling away from the order and harmony of a properly governed Eden. The builders of the tower of Babel are, similarly, derelict in their kingship. Instead of abiding by the will and purpose of God, they seek to make names for themselves and to challenge the supremacy of God. The inevitable result of this bad leadership is a division—precisely the opposite of the coming together that God desires for his creation: “So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city” (Gen. 11:8). The great exception to this tendency is Noah, who is correctly identified as a second Adam, a renewer of humanity. Following the prompts of God, Noah gathers together a remnant of Yahweh’s good creation and governs it effectively during a time of moral and spiritual chaos. He then allows the life that he had preserved to flood the world, thereby universalizing the harmony and integrity that obtained on the ark. Interestingly, even Noah is a compromised king. Instead of maintaining a consistent dominion over his family and over the earth, Noah drinks excessively of the fruit of the vine and allows himself to be displayed shamefully before his sons. Thus this new Adam shares in the ambiguity of the first Adam.

The definitive rescue operation that God launches is described in the twelfth chapter of Genesis.¹ God summons Abram from Ur of the Chaldeans, calls him to go in quest of a promised land, and then makes an extravagant promise: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:2–3). Abram will be a new Adam, cultivating a new Eden and expanding the boundaries of that ordered garden to include all the peoples of the world (Beale 2011: 46–48). The people who will spring from his loins and who will be shaped by his consciousness and practices will become the vehicle by which salvation is born to the rest of creation. This promise is reiterated later in Genesis, just after the halted sacrifice of Isaac: “I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth

1. Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, *Holy People, Holy Land: A Theological Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 46.

gain blessing for themselves” (Gen. 22:17–18). The emphasis on Abram’s numerous descendants calls to mind the command given to the first king to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). The royal promise is extended to Abram’s grandson. After his nightlong wrestling match with an angel, Jacob hears God: “No longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name. . . . I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you” (Gen. 35:10–11). This royal and fruitful nation, this people set apart to operate according to God’s heart, is perhaps best characterized as a “corporate Adam” endowed with the privileges and bearing the responsibilities of the first tender of the garden. At the conclusion of the book of Genesis is Jacob’s last will and testament, the patriarch’s solemn blessing for his twelve sons. To his son Judah, Jacob says, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his” (Gen. 49:10). In other words, the kingly task will be passed on to and through Judah and his tribe. We will see the crucial significance of this promise in the rise of David from the tribe of Judah to supreme kingship in Israel.

The kingship motif continues throughout the Old Testament narrative. Moses, Joshua, Samson, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samuel are kingly, new Adam figures in the measure that they order the people Israel. But even the most cursory reading of the relevant stories discloses that none of these figures is a flawless king; indeed, all share in the spiritual ambiguity of the first Adam, which means that the quest for definitive leadership in Israel is ongoing and open-ended. When the book of Judges concludes with the line “in those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg. 21:25), a certain sense of despair can be detected, signaling that the Adamic role, essential to the flourishing of the garden of Israel, is not being exercised. Throughout these opening books of the Bible, Yahweh has not yet found the king in whom his own divine purposes can become utterly incarnate. Hence Israel’s identity remains compromised and its mission unfulfilled.

It is against this rich and complex background that the emergence of Saul and David in the first book of Samuel has to be interpreted. When the people ask for a king who will unite and protect them, they are not asking for something out of step with God’s purposes. On the contrary, their request is utterly congruent with the mission of the Adamic ruler. What is deeply problematic, however, is their insistence that this king should rule in the manner of the kings of “other nations” (1 Sam. 8:5). This is why God reacts negatively (“They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them” [1 Sam. 8:7]) and also why

Samuel the prophet utters his devastating prediction of what this worldly king would do (“He will take your male and female slaves and the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves” [1 Sam. 8:16–18]). Samuel is implying that a king like those of the surrounding nations will not properly cultivate Israel, governing it according to the mind of God, but instead will order the people through oppression and violence and therefore undermine rather than sustain the mission of Israel. When the people press Samuel for a king, God says to Samuel, “Listen to their voice and set a king over them” (1 Sam. 8:22). The standard reading of this odd back and forth, this rejection and acceptance of a king, is that two sources—one anti-monarchical and the other pro-monarchical—exist in tension throughout the Samuel literature (Murphy 2010: 56–64). Be that as it may, I do not think that the interpreter ought to feel left in a lurch, caught on the horns of a desperate dilemma. A reasonable hermeneutical solution can be discerned along the lines that I have been suggesting: from Adam on, Israel is marked by both good and bad kingship. God (and Samuel) stand opposed to those forms of kingship that mimic the style and substance of the kings of the surrounding nations, but they ardently desire a form of kingship in accord with God’s designs. A king that they “have chosen for themselves” will indeed be, as Samuel sees with such clarity, a disaster, but a king “after the LORD’s heart” will be indispensable for the flourishing of the nation. The playing out of this difference—between Saul and David and also within David’s own interiority—will be the dominant motif of the Samuel literature.

Why, precisely, is Saul rejected as king? What paves the way for his shameful demise on Mount Gilboa? Two major offenses typically are brought forward as an explanation. First, prior to the battle of Gilgal, Saul proceeded with the performance of a sacrifice though Samuel had instructed the king to wait for the prophet himself to do it. When, after seven days, some of his troops began to drift away, Saul impatiently seized the moment and sacrificed, only to find Samuel arriving just as the ceremony was completed. Enraged, the prophet says, “You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God. . . . The LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, but now your kingdom will not continue” (1 Sam. 13:13–14). Though it might seem a relatively minor infraction, this disobedience on the part of Saul is at the heart of the matter, spiritually speaking. Adam seized at godliness, making himself the criterion of good and evil, arrogating to himself the prerogative that belongs to

God alone. In this primal act of refusing to abide by a higher will, he fell into bad kingship. Saul's impatience, his refusal to wait on God and Samuel, participates in that original dysfunction. Saul's sin is not unlike that of Moses at the waters of Meribah, when the great lawgiver did not listen precisely to God's instructions (Num. 20:2–13), and it is very much like Jacob's aggressive and canny seizure of Esau's blessing from Isaac (Gen. 27:1–29). Whenever the will of the leader does not correspond to the divine will, God's desire to incarnate his grace in the world is frustrated (Murphy 2010: 111).

The second great offense committed by Saul is connected to his conquest of the Amalekites described in the fifteenth chapter of 1 Samuel. God instructs Saul through Samuel that he "will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt" (1 Sam. 15:2), and so he commands Saul to attack and utterly destroy Amalek: "Kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1 Sam. 15:3). After defeating Amalek, Saul did not carry out God's command in its fullness, instead preserving the lives of the best of the sheep, cattle, and lambs as well as that of Agag, the Amalekite king. When he discovers this state of affairs, Samuel upbraids Saul, strips him of his kingship, and "hew[s] Agag to pieces before the LORD at Gilgal" (1 Sam. 15:33). A key to interpreting this startling passage is God's mention of the offense of the Amalekites when the Israelites were coming out of Egypt. The reference is to the battle described in the book of Exodus, during which Moses, in a pose both priestly and kingly, stretches his arms out in prayer, invoking the aid of Yahweh. When the battle is successfully completed, God speaks to Moses: "Write this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven" (Exod. 17:14). The author concludes his description of this scene with "The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation" (Exod. 17:16).

If this story is simply and straightforwardly about a battle with an obscure ancient Middle Eastern tribe, it makes little sense. Why in the world would God decree that this beleaguered little people should be ruthlessly and relentlessly attacked? The allegorizing approach taken by Origen of Alexandria proves helpful in this case. Origen argues that, throughout the Bible, Israel stands for the ways and purposes of God, and the enemies of Israel stand for those powers that are opposed to God.² Thus, Egypt, Philistia, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, and Rome, among many others, evoke what Karl Barth calls *das Nichtige*, the nothingness,

2. Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 232–38.

the nonbeing, which pits itself against Yahweh's creative intentions.³ These various peoples are symbolically akin both to the *tōbhû wābōhû* (Gen. 1:2) from which God brought the ordered world and to the serpent that Adam rather unsuccessfully managed in the garden.⁴ Though it is not entirely clear why this should be the case, the biblical authors seem to isolate Amalek as particularly expressive of this “nothing” that militates against Israel. When the story is read from this symbolic perspective, one can perhaps begin to comprehend the ferocity of God's command to Saul. Certain forms of evil have to be utterly destroyed. Certain moves, ideas, perspectives, actions, and convictions are so radically opposed to the purposes of God that no compromise with them can be struck, no halfway measures can be adopted. One might argue, for example, that abortion, slavery, the sexual abuse of children, racial discrimination, and the direct killing of the innocent are so morally repugnant, so intrinsically evil, that they can never be justified under any circumstances or through appeal to any further end. Might Saul's unwillingness to slaughter the herds of the Amalekites and to put to death their king symbolically represent the sort of confusion in regard to intrinsically evil acts that undermines God's purposes? And therefore might one come to sympathize with Samuel's conviction that Saul has, by this act, effectively forfeited his kingship? If one stays within the Origenistic hermeneutic, Saul's unwillingness to “hack Agag to pieces” could be paired with Adam's inability to prevent the serpent from invading the garden as two decisive failures in kingly ordering (Beale 2011: 34–35). Saul's failure to listen and obey means that the incarnational coinherence that God desires to achieve through an earthly king is once more blocked.

As Samuel leaves the presence of Saul, the king desperately clings to the robe of the prophet and tears away a piece of cloth. With devastating laconism, Samuel says, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this very day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you” (1 Sam. 15:28). The one who is better than Saul is none other than the “man after [God's] own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14), to whom God promised the kingdom following Saul's first poor exercise of kingship. This is the son of Jesse whom Samuel anoints at the prompting of God. The remainder of 1 Samuel is the long and rather desperate tale of Saul's ever-weakening grasp on kingship and David's waxing skill and authority. The final and devastating indication that Saul is grossly incapable of leadership is his recourse

3. Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, vol. 3.3 of *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 289.

4. R. R. Reno, *Genesis*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010), 39–46.

to a medium at Endor in violation of his own prohibition against consulting such figures. Incapable of listening to God, Saul listens to a representative of the dark powers that, in a scene both comic and tragic, conjures up for him the shade of Samuel, who promptly reminds the hapless Saul that God has indeed torn the kingdom from him and given it to David (Murphy 2010: 257). God was able to commence the formation of his people Israel when he found someone who was willing to listen to his word. The leaders of this people were successful precisely in the measure that they were capable of hearing the word of a power that stretched beyond them and their own purposes. Saul proved remarkably inept at listening, which proved to be his undoing. His last act of “dominion,” pathetically enough, is the taking of his own life, the exact opposite of the command to “be fruitful and multiply,” to be the bearer of life.⁵

At this point, we are ready to return to the beginning of 2 Samuel. After the death of Saul, we hear, “David had returned from defeating the Amalekites” and “remained two days in Ziklag” (2 Sam. 1:1). As I have been arguing, the act of defeating the Amalekites must be interpreted as far more than a conquest in a petty tribal struggle; in fact, it is a foreshadowing of David’s successful kingly warfare against the enemies of the God of Israel. But why had David been warring with Amalek in Ziklag, a town on the border between Philistine lands and Judah? Thereupon hangs a tale with important theological and spiritual overtones. Harassed relentlessly by Saul, David finally reaches a point of desperation and exclaims, “I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul; there is nothing better for me than to escape to the land of the Philistines” (1 Sam. 27:1). In the manner typical of biblical narrative, the matter is stated so simply that it is easy enough to pass over the sheer strangeness of this move. David, who made his name as the killer of Goliath, was celebrated as the slayer of tens of thousands of Philistines, and famously collected the foreskins of two hundred dead Philistine warriors, now goes over to the enemy, even proposing himself as a sort of bodyguard to the warlord Achish of Gath. Achish, perhaps wary of David, suggests that the Israelite defector take up headquarters not in Gath but at Ziklag. Robert Alter wryly comments that this would be akin to Winston Churchill, at the height of World War II, becoming an advisor to a Nazi general and taking up residence in Berlin (Alter 1999: 168). This curious defection of David to the enemy is one of the clearest indications of how morally devastating Saul’s jealousy was. An Israel united under a God-fearing king would be able to fulfill its mission to bring

5. Reno, *Genesis*, 56–58.

Edenic order to the wider world. But divided against itself, Israel cannot serve as the vehicle for the coming together of the nations; in fact, it becomes prey to the aggression of its enemies, and this is what Saul's uncontrolled resentment against David made possible. But Saul should not have to shoulder all of the blame. David's willingness to fight side by side with Israel's chief opponent—going so far as to accompany Achish at the battle of Mount Gilboa before being turned away by understandably suspicious Philistine officers—is certainly a sign of the weakness and moral ambiguity that will dog him throughout his reign as king. The struggle of Adam runs through the heart of David.

While he is at Ziklag, David receives a visitor, a man with torn clothes and dirt upon his head, who had come from “the camp of Israel,” from the disaster at Mount Gilboa. Prostrating himself at David's feet, the man conveys the news that the Israelite army has been defeated and that Jonathan and Saul are among the dead. A parallel can be seen with the story of the messenger who brought the news of the deaths of Eli's sons and the loss of the ark, an earlier catastrophe that prompted a shift in Israelite leadership. When David presses the man for details, we begin to see that the visitor is a most unreliable narrator (Polzin 1993: 3). First, he says that he “happened to be on Mount Gilboa” (2 Sam. 1:6) during the terrible battle between Israel and the Philistines. It certainly strains credulity to believe that a person just happened to be wandering around the site of a pitched military conflict (Alter 1999: 196). It seems far more likely that he was scavenging the ground in the wake of the fight. Further, at the close of 1 Samuel, we heard that Saul had fallen on his own sword, but this man reports to David that he himself put the gravely wounded king out of his misery and then taken Saul's crown and armlet and brought them directly to David. Both the boast that he had killed Saul and the carrying of the symbols of kingship to David are rather obvious attempts to curry favor with the one who will presumably be the next ruler of Israel, but things backfire on the man in dramatic fashion. After mourning intensely until evening, David calls the messenger and inquires as to his origins. The young man blithely responds that he is an Amalekite, which first helps to explain why he felt no particular hesitation at doing violence to the king of Israel but also makes clear the wider theological context for understanding his act. A member of that tribe of archetypal enemies of Israel, the messenger is evocative of those forces that would divide and conquer the people of God. Though he correctly intuits that David will be the next king, and though he signals, by the delivery of the crown and armlet, the fulfillment of Samuel's prophecy, he reveals himself as a divider, a fomentor of civil strife, and a killer of Yahweh's anointed one. He is a

serpent in the garden. Therefore, David, acting here as a righteous king, does to him what Samuel did to Agag the Amalekite and what Adam should have done to the snake: “David called one of the young men and said, ‘Come here and strike him down.’ So he struck him down and he died” (2 Sam. 1:15; Beale 2011: 34).

At this point, I must address an issue that preoccupies the author of the Samuel literature from the beginning to the end of his work: David’s consistent refusal to do violence to Saul or his house despite Saul’s deep and abiding hostility toward David. To be sure, almost every contemporary commentator is skeptical on this score, seeing the presentation of David’s gentleness toward Saul as either hagiographical whitewashing or a none-too-subtle attempt to exonerate David for what was, doubtless, his aggressive usurpation of his predecessor.⁶ Obviously, it is next to impossible to adjudicate the historical truth in this regard with anything approaching exactitude. What is more available, and far more interesting theologically, is the presentation of David that the author gives in the text—the picture of a prince relentlessly respectful of Yahweh’s anointed one.

In 1 Samuel we find two remarkable stories of David consciously refusing to kill Saul when the opportunity to do so arises. In both cases, advisors urge him to perform the act and hence put an end to the desperate civil war that is bedeviling Israel, but David demurs. Though it would benefit him personally and prove advantageous to the nation politically, David will not do violence to one that Yahweh himself anointed as king. To understand the attitude of David, one must come to terms with a biblical sense of divine providence and human freedom, both of which are starkly at odds with a modern understanding of the same two realities. On the modern reading, freedom is best characterized as sovereign choice. The free subject stands indifferently above a variety of options and, on the basis of no internal or external constraint, determines which to choose. Given this interpretation, two of the principal foes of freedom are a circumscribing law and the fussy intervention of a rival divine freedom. This is why, having elevated this “liberty of indifference,” much of modern philosophy and religion is compelled to construe divine providence along vaguely deist lines, whereby God sets the context in which human freedom operates but does not function as a real actor in cooperation with that freedom.⁷ But all of this is alien to the biblical consciousness. For the biblical writers (as for most classical philosophers as well), freedom

6. Walter Brueggemann, *David’s Truth in Israel’s Imagination and Memory* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 31–32.

7. Servais Pinckaers, *Morality: The Catholic View*, trans. Michael Sherwin (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), 72–75.

is not so much sovereign, uncompelled choice as the disciplining of desire so as to make the achievement of the good first possible and then effortless. Think of the process by which a person learns to play the piano or to swing a golf club with easy confidence. Given this construal of freedom, one is becoming free—able to play any piece one wishes or make any shot the round is calling for—precisely in the measure that one internalizes a whole set of laws, regulations, and disciplines and submits to the tutelage of a skilled teacher able to communicate this freedom to the learner. The lawgiving instructor is therefore not the enemy of the student’s freedom but rather the condition for its possibility. On this interpretation, God, the supreme lawgiver, does not have to be transformed into an abstraction or relegated to the sidelines of free human activity. On the contrary, God can and should be viewed as an enabling partner to free human actors involved in the drama of history.

Operating with this notion of freedom and providence, David knew that God chooses and moves within Israelite history and that God’s acts, having a legitimate sovereignty, must become the matrix for properly functioning human moral activity. Hence God’s decision to anoint Saul as king could not be taken lightly, and whatever David might become through his own volition should not countermand the prior decision that God made. The apostle Paul states that there is a “power at work within us” that is able “to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Eph. 3:20). That statement, intelligible only on the reading of biblical freedom that I have presented here, expresses well what David must have had in mind when he played his complex and emotionally wrenching cat-and-mouse game with Saul. God’s choice of Saul—perhaps incomprehensible to David and most right-thinking people in Israel—was the brute fact with which David had to contend, and it was simply not his place to freely move against it. God was, inscrutably enough, working out his purposes precisely through allowing Saul’s wickedness, as king, to express itself. In light of Samuel’s anointing, David must have suspected strongly that he would become king, but at the same time he knew that this royal accession could never take place through his own violent action against Saul.

All of this raises the even deeper theological question regarding God’s permission of evil. David seems to have intuited (correctly enough, at least in the mind of the author of 2 Samuel) that Saul’s very wickedness was an ingredient in God’s providential design, especially in regard to David himself. While I could certainly speak of God’s general allowance of the twisted exercise of human freedom, there seems to be more at stake in these stories, something denser and more puzzling:

God is accomplishing what he wants through the moral depravity of Saul. We can see this odd relationship in a number of other stories of biblical heroes. Joseph is presented initially as a supremely annoying young man, the coddled favorite of his father and a taunting nemesis to his understandably jealous brothers. He was in absolutely no position, at that stage of his moral development, to assume leadership. But God used the wickedness of Joseph's own brothers, the slave traders who purchased him, and the wife of Potiphar, who had him imprisoned, in order to discipline Joseph in the direction of mature leadership. Similarly Moses, who is introduced to us as a headstrong, violent, and morally irresponsible prince of Egypt, is forced into exile by an overreacting Pharaoh and hence compelled to commence the process by which he would be prepared for his role as liberator. It appears as though God, who is sovereign over both history and nature, can work into his providential design even the sinful behavior of bad people. Therefore (and this seems to be a principal point throughout the David stories) one should be wary of preempting this providence or presuming to improve upon it through one's moral acts, even those acts that seem, on the surface of it, altogether praiseworthy. David's stubborn unwillingness to do violence to Saul is another sign of his kingly worthiness, for it indicates that his actions were predicated not primarily on self-interest but rather on an attentive listening to the voice of God. Saul would be the anointed king until God saw fit to remove him, and it was not David's place to question God's wisdom or meddle interruptively in God's designs.

But there is even more at stake theologically in David's gentleness toward Saul, and here we will look for the first time toward Christ Jesus, the definitive Son of David. Just after hearing the taunting song of the women, "Saul has slain his thousands, but David his ten thousands" (1 Sam. 18:7), Saul is consumed with jealousy toward his protégé. Twice he hurls a spear at David, and then, over the course of many months, he doggedly pursues the younger man. Through all of it, David never responds with violence. Instead, he gets out of Saul's way—running, avoiding, and evading but never directly confronting his persecutor. Indeed, after refraining from killing the king when Saul wandered unescorted into a cave where David and his men were hiding, David bows to the ground before Saul, does "obedience" (1 Sam. 24:8), and says, "I have not sinned against you, though you are hunting me to take my life. . . . May the LORD avenge me on you; but my hand shall not be against you" (1 Sam. 24:11–12). David's gesture and speech so impress the king that Saul says, with tears, "You are more righteous than I; for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil" (1 Sam. 24:17). What we see here is something fairly rare in the Old Testament: the employment of active

and provocative nonviolence as a moral strategy. David does not engage Saul directly, using the conventional weapons of war; rather, he strategically retreats and feints, using the stronger man's energy against him. Moreover, as the speech just rehearsed suggests, he "killed Saul with kindness," stubbornly returning good for the king's evil, thereby shaming his pursuer and compelling him to look at things from David's perspective. Aikido, a particularly effective form of martial art, involves precisely this sort of subtlety and indirection. The practitioner of aikido does not directly engage the enemy punch for punch; instead, the practitioner redirects the opponent's force by deftly getting out of the way and giving in to the aggression, but doing so in such a way that the aggression itself doubles back against the aggressor.⁸ We see something of this in young David's battle with Goliath. Putting aside the armor of Saul, which prohibited him from maneuvering, David meets the giant armed only with a slingshot and uses Goliath's arrogance and heavy-handedness against him.

Jesus, born in David's hometown of Bethlehem, certainly came as a warrior King. C. S. Lewis remarks that Jesus arrived so quietly, born in a cave in a little outpost of the Roman Empire, precisely because he had to slip clandestinely behind enemy lines.⁹ The new David's manner of fighting was unconventional to say the least, though it was anticipated by David's aikido-like engagement of Saul. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus recommends that, when confronted with violence or aggression—"if anyone strikes you on the right cheek" (Matt. 5:39)—one should respond not with answering violence but rather with a turning of the other cheek.¹⁰ It is tempting indeed to read this simply as a recommendation toward passivity, but that temptation should be strenuously resisted. The two classic responses to aggression, evident both in the animal kingdom and among human beings, are fight or flight. Either one answers violence with counterviolence or one acquiesces to it. Though in our conflicted and sinful world one or the other of these responses is sometimes all that is reasonably possible, most people realize that neither fight nor flight truly solves the problem of violence. The former tends to increase it, and the latter tends to condone it. What Jesus is proposing is a third way. In the society of his time and place, people would never use the left hand for any form of social interaction. Therefore, anyone who struck someone on the right cheek would be hitting that person with the back of the hand, a gesture indicative of contempt and aggressive superiority. To

8. Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 43.

9. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1943), 51.

10. Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence*, 14–16.

turn the other cheek, therefore, is certainly not to fight back, but neither is it to acquiesce. It is to stand one's ground and signal, in a provocative manner, that the aggressor will not be allowed to strike in the same way again. Mirroring back the aggression of the aggressor, turning the other cheek is an aikido-like move.¹¹ Or, to use a metaphor employed by Paul, it is "to pour burning coals upon the head" (Prov. 25:22) of the violent person, answering evil with good and thereby intensifying the wicked person's cognizance of his or her own wickedness. John Cassian finds an anticipation of New Testament nonviolence in David's moves in regard to Saul: "We know that David went beyond the precepts of the law when, despite Moses's command to pay back one's enemies in kind, he not only did not do this but even embraced his persecutors in love, prayed devoutly to the Lord on their behalf, and even wept mournfully for them."¹²

Cassian's reference to David's weeping provides a nice segue into a consideration of David's famous elegy to the slain Saul and Jonathan, the "Song of the Bow" (2 Sam. 1:19–27), one of the most hauntingly beautiful songs of its type anywhere in the literature of the world. That David is a singer of songs is one of the first things we learn about him; we are told that he was summoned from the tending of Jesse's sheep in order to sing and play for the troubled Saul (1 Sam. 16:18). At the end of 2 Samuel we find David described, in the King James Version's lovely rendering of the Hebrew, as the "sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 Sam. 23:1). And of course David is associated, either as author or inspiration, with the majority of the songs that comprise the book of Psalms. He is a warrior, to be sure, indeed the consummate warrior of Israel; he is a king, to be sure, indeed the archetypal king; but he is also a singer, a poet, someone capable of leading the people through the beautiful articulation of their anxieties and aspirations. In this regard, David is a forerunner of Lincoln or Churchill. How many Americans today can remember the particular political and military decisions that Lincoln made during the Civil War? But is there an American who does not know the words, rhythms, and cadences of the Gettysburg Address? Lincoln led as much through poetic speech as through canny administration. How many Britons can recall the details of Churchill's practical direction of the war against Hitler? But is there a Briton who has forgotten about the prime minister who promised "blood, toil, tears, and sweat"? Leadership is a complex, multifaceted skill involving management and vision but also the capacity to engage the imaginations of those to be led.

11. *Ibid.*, 9–28.

12. John Cassian, "Conference 21.4.2," in *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel*, ed. John R. Franke, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament 4* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 331.

Therefore, if this association of David with singing and playing has any historical validity, there seems no ground for doubting David's authorship of the lament.

We are told that David himself instructed, presumably when he was king in Hebron, that the Song of the Bow be taught to the people of Judah (2 Sam. 1:18; Alter 1999: 198). A somewhat cynical reading would suggest that David wanted to advertise as far as possible his warm feelings toward the house of Saul so as to hold off the suspicion that he had been actively involved in causing the death of the king. Though attractive to postmodern interpreters, such a reading, in my view, does not shed the most light.¹³ Yes, Saul relentlessly pursued David, but nothing in a straightforward reading of 1 Samuel would justify the claim that David was harboring a hidden grudge against the king. Rather the younger man is consistently presented as respectful toward Saul and bewildered at the king's behavior. Therefore I see no need to read the praise offered in the elegy nor the command to publish it as cynical political maneuvering on David's part. Perhaps it is best interpreted as David's attempt not only to express his own feelings but also to make some sense of God's providence as it played itself out in the tragedy of Saul.

David begins, "Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen!" (2 Sam. 1:19). There is a wonderful ambiguity in the Hebrew here: *haṣṣēbî* can mean either "glory" or "gazelle" (Baldwin 1988: 191–92). Thus the author may be using a beautiful trope suggesting that the warriors of Israel are like skilled and graceful animals killed in their last redoubt after having been relentlessly pursued by their enemies. The reference to the heights also evokes Israel's typical hiding place from the Philistines, who preferred to do battle on the plains, where their chariots were more efficiently utilized. The sense is that even there, in their usual place of safety, the flower of Israel's youth has been tragically cut down. But "high places" carries a further overtone and brings out the distinctively spiritual or religious dimension of the disaster. Throughout the Torah and the Deuteronomistic History, the "high places" designates the locales where false gods are worshiped (Polzin 1993: 24–25). Again and again Israel is counseled by its leaders and prophets to tear down the Asherah poles on those heights, which had been erected to the gods of the surrounding peoples. Thus, "I will destroy your high places and cut down your incense altars; I will heap your carcasses on the carcasses of your idols" (Lev. 26:30); and "You shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, destroy all their figured stones, destroy all their cast images, and demolish all their high places" (Num. 33:52).

13. Brueggemann, *David's Truth*, 9–10.

God issues this utterly representative warning through the prophet Ezekiel: “I will destroy your high places. . . . Your towns shall be waste and your high places ruined. . . . The slain shall fall in your midst” (Ezek. 6:3, 6–7). In short, there is a causal connection between the worship of idols on the high places and the piling up of the corpses of Israelites. In the subtle insinuation of David’s verse, is there the sense that the reason for the downfall of Saul was none other than his bad worship, his refusal to obey and honor God? We ought not forget that just before the disaster on Mount Gilboa, Saul had sought out the ministrations of the medium at Endor—precisely the sort of debased religiosity that the law of Israel precluded.

The lament continues with David exhorting, “Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not on the streets of Ashkelon”—two of the principal cities of the Philistines—“or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice, the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult” (2 Sam. 1:20). There are ironic overtones here. First, when David was a vassal of the king of Gath and engaged in raids on the border towns of Judah, he slaughtered all of his enemies, lest word of his activities get back to Gath (1 Sam. 27:11). Second, David cannot bear to hear the rejoicing songs of the Philistine women, echoing the songs of the Israelite women who had sung of David slaying “his ten thousands.” The sweet singer of Israel certainly understands the political power of songs and myths. The loss of Israel’s reputation among its enemies could cost it more dearly than the loss of troops and king in the field.

Next, David utters a sort of curse on the territory where the terrible battle took place: “You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields!” (2 Sam. 1:21). One of Yahweh’s principal promises to Israel was to give them a land flowing with milk and honey. This earth was meant as a recapitulation of the garden of Eden, which Adam and Eve, prior to the fall, cultivated and made fruitful. Therefore the place where the Philistines triumphed over Israel and its king should, by rights, become barren ground. David chooses a vivid and heartbreaking image to evoke the defeat of Saul: “For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more” (2 Sam. 1:21). In ancient times warriors anointed their shields to make them both more beautiful and more resistant to blows, and thus there is great sadness in envisioning the dented shield of the king lying unadorned and useless against his enemies (Alter 1999: 199). But there is a more theological valence to the image as well, for Saul was the *māšīah*, the anointed of Yahweh (indeed, this is the term that David often uses for him), and so his unanointed shield is evocative of the loss of his kingship, which came because of his refusal to attend to God (Baldwin 1988:

193). Many scholars comment that this elegy by David represents the moment of transition, the passing of the torch from Saul to the new king, and one might see the grimy, battered, and unanointed shield of Saul as clear indication that it was time for another *māšīah*.

After the mention of the defensive implement of the shield, David turns to a retrospective look at the offensive weapons wielded by Saul and his son: “From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan did not turn back, nor the sword of Saul return empty” (2 Sam. 1:22). This trope of the victors’ weapons feasting on the flesh of the conquered is fairly common in the ancient world, but it is intended here to highlight the warlike quality of the anointed king of Israel. At their best, Saul and Jonathan did the hard work of protecting the garden and did not shrink from using lethal violence to do it. But now that the bow and sword are lying in the dust, Israel needs a new defender. Of course, the poet refrains from mentioning that the spear of Saul was, at least two times, directed at David himself! He also makes the curious observation that Saul and his son Jonathan were “in life and death . . . not divided” (2 Sam. 1:23). Though Jonathan certainly fought at Saul’s side, the son showed his clear preference for David. Sensing this shift in loyalty, Saul even hurled a spear in the direction of Jonathan. Does one sense here a touch of propaganda, a bit of the elegist’s understandable tendency toward idealization (Alter 1999: 200)? Or is this another example of David’s consistent resolution to answer the violence of Saul with nonviolence, this time at the level of speech? Obviously, destroying a cruel enemy’s reputation is one of the best ways to inflict harm, especially after the enemy is dead and thus unable to defend it. This, however, David nobly refuses to do.

The peroration to the “daughters of Israel” to weep over Saul neatly balances the earlier command that the daughters of the Philistines should not rejoice over the defeat at Gilboa, but it is also an evocation of the songs of the Israelite women that initially prompted Saul to hate his protégé. The elegist seems to suggest that the mourning of the Israelite women for the fallen king might in some sense make up for their cries of joy that provoked such calamity for the nation. What follows is the achingly poignant address to the poet’s fallen friend: “Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women” (2 Sam. 1:25–26). Though Jonathan had several times declared his love for David, only after Jonathan’s death does David reciprocate, calling his companion “brother” and speaking frankly of his love for him. Though some have suggested, especially in recent years, that the characterization of this love as

“passing the love of women” is an indication of a homoerotic element in David’s affection for his friend, this is unconvincing. Robert Alter argues convincingly that in the warrior culture of this time, “the bond between men could easily be stronger than the bond between men and women” (Alter 1999: 200–201). In the cultural context of ancient Greece, Aristotle comments that a man can cultivate a real friendship only with another male since friendship has to take place between equals.¹⁴ Aristotle’s remark insinuates homosexuality as little as David’s does.

However, one should not overlook the importance of David’s intense friendship with the son of Saul. From Jonathan’s side, it signals the orientation of true love, which is directed toward the other. Jonathan willingly surrendered his status and position in favor of David, easily, even gratefully, acknowledging that David and not he would one day succeed Saul. And despite the enormous danger to himself, Jonathan consistently defended and protected David.¹⁵ John Chrysostom comments that Jonathan ought to have been jealous of the upstart shepherd who was rivaling him for the throne, “but he [Jonathan] favored David obtaining the sovereignty; and he didn’t spare his father for the sake of his friend. . . . Instead of envying, Jonathan joined in obtaining the kingdom for him.”¹⁶ This lovely surrender to the other is what led Aelred of Rievaulx and many others to see in Jonathan’s relationship to David the model of true friendship.¹⁷ From David’s side, the relationship shows once more his intense tie with the house of Saul despite Saul’s murderous opposition. A number of times in the course of 2 Samuel David will endeavor to show kindness to members of Saul’s house “for the sake of Jonathan and Saul,” answering violence with favor. Chrysostom goes so far as to hint that David’s behavior is a model to all those who would show favor to both the living and the dead.¹⁸ Certainly one of the most powerful ways that David demonstrated his love for his friend slain on the slopes of Mount Gilboa was the composition of an elegy read and admired three thousand years after its composition.

14. Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, trans. F. H. Peters (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1881), 265–66.

15. Robert Pinsky, *The Life of David* (New York: Schocken, 2005), 31–32.

16. John Chrysostom, “Homilies on 2 Timothy 7,” in Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel*, 334.

17. Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Way of Friendship: Selected Spiritual Writings*, ed. M. Basil Pennington (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2001), 71–73.

18. John Chrysostom, “Homilies on 2 Timothy 7,” 334.