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THE CAREER OF KING DAVID AND THE PURPOSE OF THE DAVIDIC NARRATIVES

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Literary, Critical and Historical Background:
The story of David is found in First and Second Samuel, which represent one of the greatest works of literature to survive from the ancient world. Taken as a whole, these books bring together a clear-eyed view of socio-political realities, characters drawn with psychological insight, and a theologically subtle claim for God's providential role in history: they are a classic example of the rich complexity of biblical narrative as a form of writing.

Within the ordering of the canon, First and Second Samuel comprises the third element of the Former Prophets, located between Judges and Kings. Situated in this place, they provide an account of Israel's transition from a tribal society afflicted by anarchy and barbarism (Judges 17–21) to a monarchical society marked by a bureaucratic self-aggrandizement (1st Kings 1–11). The key character in the transition is David, who after being a shepherd boy becomes a tribal chief and ends up as a king. The portrayal of David as a complex personality who changes in dramatic but coherent ways over his life time is unparalleled in ancient literature. He is surrounded by a cast of other narrative characters, all of whom are presented with vivid psychological depth. This series of characters includes Samuel, Saul, Jonathan, Bathsheba, Nathan and so on. It should also be noted that in addition to these characters and the events they depict, God is involved but never excessively intrudes to usurp human agency.

According to the dominant critical proposal, by German scholar Martin Noth, the books of Samuel are part of the Deuteronomistic History. This is seen as an extended narrative designed to trace and explain the life of Israel from entry to the land in the book of Joshua to the loss of the land in the books of Kings.

The narratives of the books of Samuel may have their origins in the process of folk culture and its celebration of the spectacular personality and well-remembered historical achievements of David, a figure who looms large in the social imagination of ancient Israel. Note, however, that even if the narrative arises from folk tradition it is a sophisticated artistic achievement that explores the interface of human choice, human aberration, and divine intention.

Earlier critical scholarship believed that by the time of David we had arrived at historically reliable narratives. The issue is now much more disputed among scholars. The more sceptical view of these narratives (and other texts) is that they contain little or no reliable, externally corroborated data; this position is held by a group known as the "minimalists". At the other end of the spectrum some scholars are happy to accept the historical veracity of the biblical account on its own terms; these may be termed "maximalists". Most biblical scholars deploy a degree of wariness in relation to questions of historicity, though perhaps not to the extent displayed by those termed "minimalists" (among whom may be included Thomas Thompson, Philip Davies, Keith Whitelam, and Niels Peter Lemche). It may be suggested that in part at least "maximalists" tend to believe the accuracy of the Bible as read through the influence of prior faith commitments as much as by scholarship. (On this debate see Philip Davies, "Minimalism, 'Ancient

Israel', and Anti-Semitism" and also "Maximalists and Minimalists"). A more balanced judgment of the books of Samuel is that we have a historically grounded memory of a tribal chieftain of modest proportions, which has been enhanced and exaggerated through artistic imagination.

One aspect of the dispute over historicity is centred on a stela, found by archaeologists at the excavation at Tel Dan: it has an inscription which might read "House of David", thereby proving David existed. This stela is dated by some archaeologists to the ninth century BCE, though this is disputed by others. Such a date would seem to be an authentication of the biblical text in its presentation of Davidic rise and rule; but note that even a dated piece of evidence like this is no verification for any detail of the textual tradition. Whatever the "facts of the case", they are irretrievable. We need to therefore focus on the way the traditioning process itself intends us to remember and assess the transition from tribal society to monarchy in ancient Israel.

It is widely held that in their final form the books of Samuel represent the combining of several independent sources that have been edited and arranged to generate a particular perspective on the Davidic transition from tribal society to the modest beginnings of monarchy.

Sources and Sections–Pre-Davidic: Different sources may be understood to lie behind different sections of the books of Samuel, giving them an overall structure. First Samuel 1–15 tells of the transition prior to the narrative appearance of David (who is first mentioned in chapter 16). In this pre-Davidic material, chapters 1–3 provide an account of the rise of Samuel to become the most prominent leader in Israel and eventually the king-maker; he is therefore someone important in the rise of David. Then in First Samuel 4:1–7:1 there is a focus on stories about the Ark. Together these are known as the "Ark Narrative". They are important in paving the way for monarchy because they (a) illustrate that the governance arrangement under Eli had become corrupt and (b) show that Israel is now vulnerable to new enemies, like the Philistines, who are better organized—there is a case for Israel to change from a tribal basis; this context paves the way for monarchy and David.

As the case for change emerges, First Samuel 7:2–15:35 is an extended narrative preoccupied with the problematic question of the rise of the monarchy as a defining social institution in ancient Israel. It is conventional among scholars to identify a pro-monarchy source (9:1–10:16; 11; 13–14) and an anti-monarch source (7–8; 10:17–27; 12). The final text thus contains conflicting opinions on this major reorganization of social power: the pro-monarchy source saw the rise of kingship as an act of self-defence in keeping with God's intention, and was perhaps close to the events narrated; conversely, the anti-monarchy source viewed human kingship as an act of defiance to the kingship of God, and was perhaps a later critical reflection on the exploitive governance of Solomon. The negative anticipation of monarchy in First Samuel 8:10-18 thus reflects the practice of kingship embodied in the reign of Solomon.

While the relationship of these texts to history is problematic, the reality of social conflict over the reconfiguration of power is entirely credible. Over recent years scholars have devoted considerable attention to sociological analysis of the period that David dominates. In such a context, it is entirely likely that some groups in society stood to benefit greatly from the establishment of a centralized authority that would significantly influence economic, political and military life. By contrast, other segments of the community would perceive in the move towards monarchy a return to the concentration of power among urban elites, as had been the case in the Canaanite city-states so vigorously opposed by early Israel. It is important to realize that the dispute about kingship is not only a religious matter; it also has social implications related to matters of power, economic systems and wealth distribution.

The anti-monarchy source reflects a peasant consciousness in a decentralized, segmented society that kept communal decision making local, and viewed the newly instituted king as a "taker" who would confiscate surplus wealth and legacy from the peasant community (see 1st Samuel 8).

Saul is the specific narrative character who is the vehicle for this dispute over social power. He is anointed king at God's behest, but is never sufficiently free from dispute to be able to function as king and really establish the institution of kingship. According to David Gunn, Saul is a tragic figure, who is "fated" to failure by the looming presence of David on the horizon of the narrative, even before David is even mentioned. In this reading, without mentioning him by name, the narrator twice signals the coming of David as the one favoured by God, Israel and, indeed, the narrator (see 1st Samuel 13:13–14; 15:28).

Consequently, Saul functions primarily as a foil to David and never fully develops as a character: instead the narrative rushes to David.

Sources and Sections–The Rise of David: The next section of the narrative in First Samuel deals with the Rise of David. According to scholarly consensus, it is the first of two important extended sources in the books of Samuel. It begins with the account of the introduction of David to the narrative in First Samuel 16:1–13 and concludes in Second Samuel 5:1–5. From beginning to end the flow of the narrative depicts the unstoppable advance of David from shepherd boy (1st Samuel 16:11) to "shepherd king" of Israel (2nd Samuel 5:2). This rise in power, prominence and privilege progresses undeterred so that nothing bad ever happens to David along the way. Theologically, the Rise of David indicates the providential intentionality of God, who has willed David's accession to power. But just below the surface of this theological observation, we can note that the rise is also brought about by a series of cunning and ruthless acts of self-advancement on the part of David. The narrator artistically lingers over these acts and in this way draws our attention to how the rise is a carefully (and perhaps shamelessly) engineered advance: human guile and divine providence are interwoven in an intriguing way. The narrative thus has multiple layers, which add to its richness.

Overall, the plot of the narrative of the rise is driven by the ongoing struggle for power between Saul and David: each has a faithful entourage and each lays claim to divine anointing. From the beginning, the tenor of the narrative favours David, who will eventually prevail, even though Saul will not easily yield. A number of points from this section should be noted:

1. David is related to the house of Saul in delicate, deliberate and complex ways. In addition to being something of a protégé of Saul, David is a close companion of Saul's son, Jonathan, and seems to pre-empt Jonathan as Saul's anticipated heir (1st Samuel 20:14–17). Notice should also be taken of David's marriage to Michal: this would have granted him some legitimacy in Saul's family (1st Samuel 18:20–29). David's lament over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan indicates either a genuine affection for them or the capacity to portray such affection (2nd Samuel 1:19–27): the text allows both readings, for in the narrative David is presented as perfectly capable of such a performance.
2. On two occasions when David had the opportunity to kill Saul but spared him, Saul affirms David's coming kingdom (1st Samuel 24:17–20 and 26:26). So even Saul, while he continues to oppose David, is made a proponent of his coming rule. Traditionally, David's sparing of Saul is viewed as an act of noble magnanimity; but the stories also permit a much more self-interested reading of David's motives. Notice the very particular way David frames his decision not to kill Saul as refusing to raise a hand against "the Lord's anointed" (1st Samuel 24:10; 26:9): it is in David's interest to have a precedent against anyone harming the Lord's anointed since he is in fact, since First Samuel 16, actually the Lord's anointed.
3. At the end of the Rise, David is the beneficiary of a series of convenient deaths: Saul (1st Samuel 31; 2nd Samuel 1); Asahel (2nd Samuel 2); Abner (2nd Samuel 3); Ishbaal (2nd Samuel 4). Each of these deaths removed a major hindrance to David's rise to power. In each case, David loudly establishes the guilt of the murderer and so asserts his own innocence. David's zeal in his responses may indicate that he himself is implicated in the deaths and needs to find a way to demonstrate his innocence when he is heavily under suspicion: this may be a case of someone protesting too much.

Through the unfolding of the narrative, David arrives at the throne of Judah in Second Samuel 2:1–4, unscathed by the several murders that have occurred on his behalf, and is made king in Israel by covenantal agreement (2nd Samuel 5:1–5). David's march to power is contested along the way but never seriously impeded as the narrator presents it. The Rise of David is willed by God but is accomplished through the cut and thrust of politics. It is important to recognize that just below the surface of such convinced theological affirmation the skill of the narrator subtly indicates the many ambiguities that accompany David's Rise.

Sources and Sections–Establishing the State: At the end of the narrative depicting the Rise of David, the literature turns to institution building in a series of texts that portray the consolidation of the newly formed regime (2nd Samuel 5:6-8:18). In general, these chapters lack the vibrant dramatic quality of what has gone before and instead soberly account for the way an established chieftain begins the project of nation building. While historicity of these chapters is disputed, it may be noted that this is the way the final form of the tradition wants readers to understand how David established himself.

The core materials in these four chapters are arranged in a pattern to underline how "tribal" considerations have been superseded by "state" action:

Ark (2nd Samuel 6:1–20)	→	Dynasty (2nd Samuel 7:1–17)
Philistine wars (2nd Samuel 5:17–25)	→	State wars (2nd Samuel 8:1–14)
Children (2nd Samuel 5:13–16)	→	Officials (2nd Samuel 8:15–18)

The first member of each pair clearly reflects the interests and preoccupations of the tribal stage of organization; the second, with a focus on state wars, a dynastic oracle and an emerging bureaucracy, typifies the formation of a state: a decisive transition in social organization has taken place and is reflected in the structure of the text. Special notice should be taken of the divine oracle of Second Samuel 7:1–17 in this collection of texts. Here God, through Nathan, makes a sweeping unconditional promise to David and to the Davidic dynasty to come. It is impossible to overstate the importance of this divine commitment, which represents a crucial theological innovation in Israel, given the conditional nature of the Sinai covenant (see Exodus 19:5–6). This commitment of God will be a key component (particularly in the books of Kings and Chronicles) as the tradition ponders the durability of the dynasty and in subsequent prophetic oracles of hope that anticipate a coming Messiah. Even though the oracle can be seen as part of a process of royal propaganda, it is also of immense theological importance (a) as the taproot of messianic thought in the Old Testament, which became a hope for an ideal Davidic king yet to come (see Isaiah 9:1–7), and (b) as a foundational piece in the understanding of unconditional grace by the covenanting God of Israel.

To underline the significance of the promise given in Second Samuel 7:1–17: in the midst of a candid initial presentation of David, God makes an unconditional promise of kingship to David and his sons who are to come after him. This promise gives ideological legitimacy to David's dynasty, underpinning and contributing to its remarkable longevity (there were only twenty Davidic kings in 400 hundred years). Beyond that political reality, the unconditional promise became the driving force of royal expectation in Israel, which was eventually transposed into messianic hope: given the historical failure of the Davidic monarchy, Israel looked forward to a true and perfect Davidic king in time to come; God would give this king and he would enact Israel's best hopes and God's best promises.

Note should also be taken of how the oracle has received important poetic articulation and commentary in the Psalms: Psalm 132 (especially vv. 11–17) parallels the conviction of Second Samuel 7; Psalm 78, in the course of a recounting of Israel's history, articulates the basis for Davidic Zion theology (see vv. 67–72); but Psalm 89 raises the problem that the unconditional promise of 2nd Samuel 7 did not endure (see vv. 38–52). In many ways, this is an astonishing claim: it illustrates the struggle within scripture and underlies that the Bible does not always speak with one voice.

Sources and Sections–The Succession Narrative: This is the second great narrative source in the books of Samuel; thus the Succession Narrative forms a counterpoint to the Rise of David source: taken together, these two very different kinds of materials constitute what can be called an account of the rise and fall of David. The Succession Narrative is comprised of Second Samuel 9–20 (plus 1st Kings 1–2 as a conclusion). The question of a successor to David (posed in 1st Kings 1:27) is taken to be the overriding issue explored in this extended narrative material: as rivals are eliminated Solomon emerges as David's ultimate successor (1st Kings 1:32–40).

The material is arranged around two great climatic moments. In the first, at the end of chapter 11, David must respond to the death of Uriah, a death he has imperiously authorized. In his response to the report of the death, David is presented as an uncaring, unfeeling public figure whose required cover-up converges with the reasons of state (2nd Samuel 11:25). The second great climatic moment in the narrative occurs at the death of David's son Absalom (2nd Samuel 18:33–19:9). The link between the death of Absalom and Uriah is David's "fixer", Joab: he arranges the death of Uriah and kills Absalom himself, again for reasons of state. Only this time David's response to the killing is profound grief. Indeed, the grief is so profound that Joab must summon David back to his public role as king. The response of David to the death of Absalom is thus sharply contrasted to his response to the death of Uriah. It may be that the narrative is arranged to highlight these two moments of extremity: in one David is an unflappable public man, in the other he is moved in a deeply personal way. The interplay of the public and the personal allows the narrative to begin to explore the depths of human reality.

The wider significance of Second Samuel 11 should also be noted: it focuses on the pivotal event of David's seizure of Bathsheba and murder of Uriah. By Nathan's prophetic critique, the memory of Israel marks this event as the defining reality of monarchical Israel. Moreover, Israel remembered this in its subsequent historiography (see 1st Kings 15:5), which is Deuteronomistic in cast. In this chain of remembering, David is presented as a ruthless, ambitious power player, warts and all. But observe how First Chronicles 11–29 (a later literature), serves a very different purpose: it offers a less candid portrayal of David, without the sordid elements. Here David is pictured less ambiguously and more idealistically, mainly as a liturgical worship leader.

A number of comments can be made on the importance of the Succession Narrative material:

1. On account of the high standard of the narrative art inherent in this text, German scholar Gerhard von Rad is of the opinion that it is the earliest account of human history in which human agents act with freedom.

2. Given the skill and artistry of the work, the critical view is that the narrative is not mere reportage. Instead it is an intensely imaginative presentation of matters, perhaps derived from what happened, but now representing a profound literary achievement, characterized by openness to ambiguity and different interpretations.

3. Theology is important but the narrative goes a long way in developing the concept of the hiddenness of God's governance in an otherwise human history. Thus the text operates at the interface of humanness in a world ordered by the hidden God of Israel's faith.

4. Taken together, the Rise of David and Succession Narrative sources may be interpreted respectively as presenting David as living "under blessing" (when everything fortunate happens to him as he receives advantage after advantage) and "under curse" (when David's life, family and dynasty unravel in violence and deception).

5. Despite God's unconditional promise to establish David and his dynasty, the lived reality of that promise in the reign of David is fluid, complex and ambiguous: the ongoing narrative is essentially a contest between God's deep commitment and the shabbiness of the human character that tests and jeopardizes that commitment. The contest is neatly encapsulated in what seems to be the intentional relationship between two texts that are important in the interpretive approach of the Deuteronomist. In Second Samuel 7:14–16 God's resolve is clear: "I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever." In these verses, note that the Hebrew verb for "take" or "remove" occurs three times: "I will not *take/remove* my steadfast love as I *took/removed* it from Saul whom I *took away/ removed* from before you." The same verb is used in the divine judgment spoken by Nathan in Second Samuel 12:10: "Now therefore the sword shall never *be taken/removed* from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife." The conclusion of the divine promise via Nathan and the divine judgment via Nathan results in two aspects that will never be taken/removed/depart from David's house: (a) God's steadfast love and (b) the sword. God's steadfast love sustains the family and dynasty of David; the sword keeps the family and dynasty of David under endless threat. The consequence is that the life of the family and dynasty is endlessly mixed: it is a contest between sustaining divine love and threatening sword. In the wider perspective of the Deuteronomistic History, divine love sustained the dynasty for a long time, but the sword finally terminated it (see Jeremiah 22:30). But even in the exile, when the dynasty is over, there is still a confidence in the promise of unfailing divine love that leads to a continued expectation of Davidic renewal (see Isaiah 55:3).

A Summary Reflection: In the character of David as remembered and portrayed in the biblical tradition, we have story of a Judean nobody who by wile, bravery and the protection of God became the king of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, establishing a rule in Jerusalem that his son Solomon would enhance even more. As part of the presentation of the life of David, the books of Samuel explore the inexorable transition of Israel from judges to kings, from tribal barbarism to monarchical bureaucracy. To a considerable degree, this transition is attributed in Israel's memory to the force and influence of David. Although the books of Samuel are considered part of the

Deuteronomistic History, Deuteronomistic thought does not exercise an excessive influence on the story of David: for all of his faults, David is well-remembered; he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and did not fail to keep any of the Lord's commands all the days of his life–except in the case of Uriah the Hittite. Thus the Deuteronomist does get an important word in.

Concept Deepening–Deuteronomistic History: During the period of intense historical-critical study of the Old Testament in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (undertaken mainly by German Protestant researchers), scholars were able to isolate and identify different literary-theological sources in the text. Among these different interpretive traditions, perhaps the most important and easily recognizable are what scholars call Deuteronomic and Deuteronomistic theology (strictly speaking the adjective "Deuteronomic" refers to that derived from within the book of Deuteronomy while "Deuteronomistic" refers to material outside the book of Deuteronomy but shaped by its thinking).

One cannot overstate the importance of the book of Deuteronomy for understanding Old Testament theology. It presents the concept and categories of covenant as normative for Israel's faith, developing the disparate traditions of Sinai and Moses. Critical judgment argues that the literature which became the book of Deuteronomy was formulated in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, perhaps under the influence of treaty documents from the Assyrians of that period. Scholars think that some version of the book of Deuteronomy was presumably found in the temple in Second Kings 22, which in turn became the impetus for the major centralizing religious reform of King Josiah.

The substance of Deuteronomic theology is found in the structure of the book and reflects a conscious covenantal pattern: the proclamation of God's saving deeds (Deuteronomy 1–11); God's covenantal commands (Deuteronomy 12–25); the making of mutual vows of covenantal fidelity (Deuteronomy 26:16–19); the recital of sanctions of blessing and curse (Deuteronomy 28). The sequence of commandment-oath-sanction places obedience to Torah/Law at the centre of faith so that in a schematic way obedient Israel receives blessing but disobedient Israel receives curse; more generally, "good people prosper and evil people suffer." Thus, Deuteronomistic theology is governed by an "If...Then" dynamic: behaviour is tightly linked to consequence in a morally coherent world presided over by a sovereign God. This type of defining formulation is expressed in Deuteronomy 30:15–20, and Deuteronomistic theology eventually understood and interpreted the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE as a particular covenant curse evoked by covenantal disobedience.

On the basis of the theology and pattern of the book of Deuteronomy, in 1943 Martin Noth proposed what became a dominant hypothesis. He argued that the extended corpus of literature that runs from Joshua through Judges and Samuel to Kings constitutes a Deuteronomistic theology of history from Israel's entry into the land to the exile and the loss of the land. These books are not history: rather they are an interpretation of history that used many old sources but, by rereading them through the lens of Deuteronomy, made much diverse material into a coherent account of the story of Israel and Judah.

Thus the characteristic practice by the kings of Israel and Judah of breaking the covenantal stipulations of the Law/Torah culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the loss of the land as the divine response to a protracted history of disobedience. In this way, Noth concluded that this long history was retold in this way to explain the destruction of 587 BCE as a punishment enacted by the God of Deuteronomy: the material is not at all historical reporting but quite self-conscious interpretation, fundamentally influenced and informed by the book of Deuteronomy. The characteristically negative judgment against kings, made especially acute with reference to Solomon, is a Deuteronomistic verdict that kings had largely failed to obey Torah/Law and so brought down deserved covenant curses on their realms (see Deuteronomy 17:14–20).

It should be noted, however, that the promise God makes to David in Second Samuel 7:1-16 constitutes an important qualification to the simple disobedience-curse formula. So the Davidic promise is a significant modification in Deuteronomistic theory and a defining theological dimension of Israel's faith, with its emphasis on the unconditional.

The Narratives about David and Other Aspects of Human Experience: As presented in the books of Samuel, the career of King David and the purpose of the Davidic narratives offer interesting connections to the modern world, among which may be suggested:

- The concept of history (including why it is written and the interests it serves) can be important for politicians portraying a "national narrative". Should religious leaders go along with this or oppose it? This is particularly pertinent to Ireland (and indeed many different conflicted contexts). Note how contemporary thinker about the nature of history, Hayden White, argues that historical writing mirrors literary writing in many ways, sharing a strong reliance on narrative for meaning, therefore ruling out the possibility of objective or truly scientific history; he also argues that history is most successful when it embraces "narrativity", since this is what allows history to be meaningful.

- The difference between official state history and a popular people's history; history from the top down or the bottom up, including the role of oral history. On what basis should the church become involved in such debates? Note how a historian like Howard Zinn has done a series of books that begin "A People's History of…" All of this raises the issue of the relationship between history and propaganda, with a focus on the Marxist proposal that the ideas of the ruling elite become the ruling ideas in any society. Does the church have a different narrative to share? One that takes sides or one that includes everybody? One of judgment or one of hope? One that is spiritual rather than this worldly?

- An exploration of history as reflected in popular culture in films/movies: for example, what is the relationship between history and Westerns, War movies etc.? What purpose do they serve? Should religious people simply go along with the prevailing values of such movies/films or can they offer an alternative? Can movies/films play a part in raising prophetic consciousness and therefore, in a way, assist the church? Think of "The Mission", "Utopia" (a film by John Pilger about aboriginal rights in Australia), and "Romero" etc.

- How important historical figures are remembered, particularly with regard to the tension between the public persona and the private person, and whether this is important in evaluating political and religious leadership. This might be teased out in relation to important people like Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela as well as celebrities like Jimmy Saville and so on. Attention can also be given to how some figures are primarily remembered positively by some communities but not by others (e.g., Ian Paisley, Gerry Adams etc.); this may be related to how all the information–good and bad–is used in remembering a person.

- How some see God at work in history and how history is presented theologically, for example, in Ireland in some of the writings by leaders of the Easter Rebellion and in an event like the signing of the Ulster Covenant; the implications of a theological idea like manifest destiny in South Africa or the United States; in the First World War both alliances believed God was on their side, a position that (along with the exceedingly high casualty rate) contributed to the growth of atheism; can God be meaningfully understood as part of the historical process?

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