

## *Apologetic Motifs in the Books of Samuel\**

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the material in the books of Samuel which could be classified as 'apologetic' in some sense; that is to say, sections which have the effect of presenting the chief character in a good light and attracting the reader's sympathy or approval. The range of such material will be examined, with some assessment of the likelihood of an apologetic purpose. Finally, the function of apologetic in the final redaction of the books of Samuel will be explored.

### **THE PROPHET SAMUEL'S APOLOGIA**

We begin with a very clear case of apologetic material in 1 Samuel 12, a chapter which records the prophet Samuel's speech to all Israel in the new situation that obtained on Saul's accession. Said he, 'Now you have a king as your leader. As for me, I am old and grey ... Here I stand. Testify against me... Whose ox have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed?' (1 Sam. 12:1-2). The people hastened to assure him of his innocence of any such charge, and both he and they acknowledged that Yahweh was witness. On this passage, John Mauchline makes the interesting comment that 'the claim made by Samuel seems a very negative one to us, but doubtless it was the effective way to present before a popular assembly the positive claim that he had been incorruptible in his work as judge and administrator'.<sup>1</sup> Mauchline limits his attention here to the prophet's own live audience, the popular assembly; but doubtless the same could be said of the biblical writer's audience. Negative it may be, but there is nothing in the least subtle about Samuel's apologia. Its forcefulness is further enhanced by the gloomy predictions about kingship that follow in the same chapter. Both portraits are expressed in a negative way—the bad things the prophet had not done are contrasted with the bad things a king was certain to do. Here then is an explicit and very unambiguous apologia.

### **APOLOGETIC MATERIAL IN THE HISTORY OF DAVID'S RISE**

The major section from 1 Samuel 16 to 2 Samuel 5 is commonly known

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as the history of David's rise. It is generally agreed that there is a good deal of apologetic material here, or even that the chief purpose of these was to present David in a good light. There is no doubt at all chapters that several of David's actions during this period of his life could have been misconstrued. Indeed, a cynical historian could cast him in a very black light. Why was he a fugitive, to begin with? Why did he choose to lead a private army? Was he an active rebel? Did he exercise a protection racket in his native Judah? Why did he join the Philistines? Did he ever fight against his own countrymen, especially at the Battle of Gilboa?

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<sup>1</sup> J. Mauchline, *1 and 2 Samuel, New Century Bible Commentary* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1971) 108.

Whose fault was the bloodbath at Nob? Did he engineer the murder of Abner? After all, it was his chief soldier Joab who struck the fatal blow. Did he suborn the assassination of his rival Ish-bosheth? All these questions can reasonably be asked by the historian. What is more, there were certainly voices at the time which expressed some such ideas: Nabal is recorded as saying, 'Many servants are breaking away from their masters these days' (1 Sam. 25:10; GNB: 'The country is full of runaway slaves!'); and a generation later Shimei was even more explicit, accusing David of wholesale slaughter 'in the household of Saul' (2 Sam. 16:8), although this accusation probably refers to some of David's actions after he became king.

These chapters do not entirely whitewash him (he took part of the blame for the Nob massacre; and he was only just prevented from murdering Nabal). The section nevertheless sets about clearing his good name in situation after situation. The following picture is presented to the reader. David was fully loyal to Saul. But for Saul's irrational hostility, he would never have left the royal court. Far from being Saul's enemy, he refused to lift a finger against him, even when he had a golden opportunity to kill him. Far from being the enemy of Saul's whole kith and kin, he was the beloved friend of Jonathan, and earned the protection and help of both Jonathan and Michal. His adventures at Nob were unfortunate in their outcome, but only served to demonstrate his desperate straits. Only similar desperation induced him to go over to the Philistines. Whereas it could not be denied that he had done so, it could be and was denied that he had ever helped them in battle against Judah or Israel. As for the Battle of Gilboa, David was nowhere in the vicinity when the battle took place. The death of Abner was due to a private vendetta between him and Joab; David had no hand in it. Nor did he have any hand in the death of Ish-bosheth, nor any pleasure in it; on the contrary, he executed the assassins.

It can scarcely be denied, then, that an apologetic motive is strong in the history of David's rise, whatever its precise literary history. We may suppose that such material dates from a time when David had enemies and detractors, and that his side of the story needed to be asserted. For his part, the eventual author/compiler (the 'Deuteronomist', to most scholars) was content to incorporate all this material in his history; or

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perhaps we should rather suppose that he found his own value in such apologetic material, even though presumably David's reputation was long since secure by his time.

The history of David's rise, then, is less explicitly apologetic than 1 Samuel 12, but the apologetic thrust is not difficult to see.

### **THE SUCCESSION NARRATIVE**

We turn now to the so-called Succession Narrative, usually delimited as 2 Samuel 9-20 plus 1 Kings 1-2. Chapters 9-20 have attracted the attention of a large number of scholars, and there is little consensus as to the origins and purpose of this section: the term 'Succession Narrative' is here used for convenience. In practice most of the attention has been focused on the genre and purpose of the putative source document. Among the hypotheses and opinions is the view that here too we have an apologetic document, this time in defence of Solomon. A

recent champion of this interpretation is P. Kyle McCarter.<sup>2</sup> It was Leonhard Rost who (in a famous monograph in 1926<sup>3</sup>) maintained that all these chapters were concerned with a single theme, a theme explicitly voiced in 1 Kings 1:20 as a question on the lips of Bathsheba: 'Who will sit on the throne of my lord the king [i.e. David] after him?' Rost's hypothesis has been very influential (although the tide has recently turned against it), and one suspects that part of its attractiveness lay in the very fact that he identified the major theme of the Succession Narrative with a question actually and explicitly posed in the biblical text.

Not all scholars have been persuaded that 1 Kings 1-2 is the literary continuation of 2 Samuel 9-20, i.e. that it stems from the same source document. At any rate, a good case exists for seeing 1 Kings 1-2 as pro-Solomonic apologetic. These two chapters record how another son of David, Adonijah, tried to seize the throne in his father's old age, but was opposed and outmanoeuvred by influential people who instead promoted Solomon's cause; David himself, we are told, had previously designated Solomon as crown prince and now took Solomon's part. Solomon himself did not instigate these events, although to be sure he went on to consolidate his position very firmly if not ruthlessly. Some scholars (notably Würthwein<sup>4</sup>) have argued that the basic picture of Solomon which emerges is unsympathetic to him, and have concluded that an originally *anti*-Solomonic document has been subject to redaction in order to redeem his character. I find this sort of argument improbable on two grounds. First, it seems to misunderstand the whole nature of apologetic. Apologetic by its very nature is bound to work with recalcitrant facts; to illustrate the point from the history of David's rise, nobody at the time could have either denied or ignored the well-known fact that David had joined the Philistines—all that could be done was to explain it and to defend his actions while in Philistia. So

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presumably with Solomon: the violent death of his three major opponents (Adonijah, Joab and Shimei) was public knowledge, but 1 Kings 2 spells out in considerable detail how it all came about, and thus defends his reputation.

My second criticism of the hypothesis is that whereas Solomon's actions strike us nowadays as ruthless, and so tend to put him in rather a bad light our modern estimation, it is by no means clear that ancient readers would have been in the least surprised at such firm action. An Adonijah would have been a permanent threat to Solomon by his very existence. (Similarly, the account of the death of Absalom in 2 Samuel tends to present Joab in his ruthlessness as the sensible and wise man, and David in his attempt to spare Absalom as weak and foolish, putting sentiment before political necessity.) It seems to me therefore quite unnecessary to find two strands in 1 Kings 1-2, one hostile to Solomon and the other favourable to him. But even on Würthwein's hypothesis, the later strand is apologetic: either 1 Kings 1-2 as a whole is apologetic in character, or at least its redaction is.

But what of 2 Samuel 9-20? Rost, as we have noted, bracketed this section with 1 Kings 1-2 and emphasised the interest all these chapters have in the question of the succession to

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<sup>2</sup> P. K. McCarter, Jr., *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1984).

<sup>3</sup> L. Rost, *The Succession to the Throne of David*, trans. M. D. Rutter and D. M. Gunn (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> E. Würthwein, *Die Erzählung von der Thronfolge Davids theologische oder politische Geschichtsschreibung*, *Theologische Studien* 115 (Zurich: (Theologischer Verlag, 1974).

David's throne. Who would in the end capture or succeed to it? David's eldest son, Amnon? Or Absalom? Or Adonijah? The story unfolds and reaches its denouement in the accession of Solomon. However, this hypothesis is certainly open to question. To quote Robert Gordon's neat epitome of the problem: on any such interpretation of these chapters, he tells us, the reader is presented with 'an invisible hero and a barely audible question'<sup>5</sup> In other words, Solomon is barely mentioned in 2 Samuel; just two verses recount his birth (2 Sam. 12:24-25) and that is all. The 'barely audible' question is 'Who will sit on David's throne after him?'—drawn verbatim from 1 Kings 1, as we have noted. However attractive it is to deduce a theme directly from the biblical text in this fashion, one has to say that Rost is asking the wrong question. Quite obviously, no reader in Solomon's reign or thereafter would have needed to ask it. The question needs recasting in the form: 'Why was it *Solomon* who sat on David's throne after him?'

Recast thus, the question is not nearly so 'inaudible' as Rost's. The Succession Narrative shows quite clearly how David's eldest sons, one after the other, were eliminated—one might almost say eliminated themselves—thus making way for the younger Solomon to succeed to the throne against all initial expectations.

What are we to make of the 'invisible hero' consideration? A mere two verses in 2 Samuel mention Solomon, it is true—but even they might be significant, since the flow of the story did not demand any mention of him at all. Indeed, they are significant, for they already tell us of God's love for Solomon, thus predisposing the reader towards him

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from the outset. Besides, quantity is not necessarily the best criterion. Taking our cue from McCarter, let us pursue the apologetic possibility, working back from 1 Kings 1-2 into 2 Samuel. Pro-Solomonic apologetic could as well be served by silence. In 1 Kings 1-2 Solomon is depicted as taking harsh steps against several individuals; nobody could deny this, but sufficient reasons are given to justify or at least explain it. But had he in fact been 'up to no good' at an earlier stage? Had he had any hand in Amnon's death? Had he been implicated in Absalom's revolt? The Succession Narrative exonerates him from any such charge by total silence; in fact, he had been one of the potential victims of Absalom, when he had been lucky to escape with his life. (To digress slightly, it is a little puzzling why 2 Samuel 13:27-33 shows such interest in the supposed fate of David's sons other than Amnon; the passage at any rate makes it clear that none of them either supported Absalom or even so much as knew what his plans were.)

The brief mention of Solomon in 2 Samuel 12:24-25 predisposes the reader in his favour, and so predisposes the reader of 1 Kings 1-2 to see Adonijah as an intruder. As for Solomon's future victim Joab, his undoubted loyalty to David was counterbalanced by some ugly features too; and Shimei's inveterate hatred of the house of David is plain to see. Thus 2 Samuel 9-20 lays a useful foundation both for the details of 1 Kings 1-2 and also for the apologetic aspects of these two chapters.

To sum up this section, we can suggest that an apologetic motive for the Succession Narrative remains not implausible. The writer's interest in the succession can also still be supported, though neither need be viewed as the only interest and purpose of these chapters. It may be

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<sup>5</sup> R. P. Gordon, *1 and 2 Samuel*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 86.

better to speak of an apologetic value than an apologetic purpose. As we saw, the apologetic is plain and outspoken in Samuel's speech in 1 Samuel 12, and at least fairly clear and unambiguous in the history of David's rise, but if it exists in 2 Samuel 9-20 it is very subtle, to say the least.

If Solomon is the 'invisible hero' in the Succession Narrative, the section has a very visible one in King David—if 'hero' is indeed the right word. Those scholars who have found both pro- and anti-Solomonic material in the Succession Narrative have tended to reach similar conclusions about David, namely that material hostile to David has been adapted by a pro-Davidic redactor. Once again there seems no cogent reason to interpret the Succession Narrative in this way. It is true that these chapters are both critical of David, above all as regards his actions towards Bathsheba and Uriah, and yet sympathetic to him. The sympathetic note is not simply an impressionistic one (though that is true) but at times explicit, as when we are told that Yahweh's purpose was to give the victory to David over Absalom. But let us be clear that whatever the attitude to Solomon in these chapters, their treatment of David is not an apologetic one. 'Sympathetic' and 'apologetic' are not

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identical. There is never a hint that David's adultery and murder could be defended or explained away. On the contrary, David is led to condemn himself, a divine verdict and sentence are pronounced, and the chapters show how the punishment worked out over many years. David's repentance was accepted, but the evil deeds could never be undone. If Solomon's actions towards rivals and opponents were understandable and condonable, the same cannot be said about David's actions towards a loyal soldier. Reading the Succession Narrative as a whole, then, I find a clear and significant distinction between the treatment of David and that of Solomon.

### **THE INSTITUTION OF THE MONARCHY**

We next consider 1 Samuel 8-12, the section which tells how Israel's monarchy began, and Saul became the first king. It is common knowledge that most scholars view these chapters as complex from a literary point of view, and in particular draw attention to the sharp contrast between those passages which are hostile to the whole concept of monarchy (including Samuel's apologia in chapter 12) and others which are neutral or even favourable towards it. Strictly speaking, the contrast is not an absolute one, though it has often enough been depicted as such. The anti-monarchic passages are never hostile to Saul in person, but to the institution or concept of monarchy; while the contrasting passages are favourable to Saul, without reflecting on the institution. I do not deny that a genuine contrast exists, however; but it is an interesting phenomenon that in spite of all the explicit criticisms of monarchy, not a word is said against Saul until subsequently (1 Sam. 13 onwards).

In view of the twin fact that these early chapters about Saul contain such criticism of the monarchy and that later chapters go on to denounce Saul so dramatically, it is surely remarkable that Saul is treated so favourably through till chapter 13. Even if the explanation of distinct sources is correct, it is still remarkable that the Deuteronomist left these contrasts intact. He allows his source materials to present Saul in a completely sympathetic light in chapters 8-12. Thus far there probably would not be any disagreement; but it is not usual to apply the term 'apologetic' to these chapters. Nevertheless, these introductory sections about Saul would certainly have defended his reputation from any suggestion that he was ambitious

to become a ruler in Israel, that he usurped the authority of the prophet Samuel, that he clawed his way to the throne, or even that he treated any potential rivals as Solomon later did! Of course, it could only be pure guess-work that any such slurs on his reputation ever circulated, and I do not wish to argue that they ever did. It is, however, perfectly possible that after Saul's death the supporters of the two royal houses, Saul's and David's, were both guilty

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of spreading rumours or making innuendos to the detriment of the reputation of David and Saul respectively. But that is as may be. All that is pertinent to this article is to draw attention to the degree to which these chapters in fact (whatever their intention) go out of their way to protect Saul's good name—even though it was a 'good name' he all too soon lost permanently. Thus, it may not be inappropriate to see these chapters too as possessing a certain apologetic value.

### SAMUEL'S EARLY YEARS

I return now to the prophet Samuel. We began our consideration of the Books of Samuel by noting his apologia in 1 Samuel 12. The reader's sympathies inevitably lie with Samuel as he loses a large degree of authority, power and leadership to the new king; all the more so since he had led Israel to victory over the Philistines and was guilty of no oppression or maladministration. The reader however tends to forget that he in turn had been a newcomer, who had displaced the house of Eli. How had that come about? Certainly not by any machinations on Samuel's part! On the contrary, he had been an associate of Eli's, living at Eli's sanctuary in Shiloh since birth. He had had no hand whatever in the downfall of Eli and his sons. Nor had he come into Eli's role so to speak by default after the death of Eli, simply by stepping into dead men's shoes. Yahweh himself (in consequence of Hannah's barrenness) had placed Samuel in Shiloh and equipped him for his future role as Israel's leader.

There is of course no biblical evidence that Samuel had political enemies who accused him of being a usurper—unless one assumes that the elders' ultimate rejection of his leadership reflects some such attitudes in the Israelite community. Perhaps there is little real historical likelihood of any such serious opposition to him. (If the view is taken that the biblical historian has greatly exaggerated Samuel's actual role, the likelihood is even less.) Here, then, genuine 'apologetic' is perhaps unlikely, and all that one should claim is that the material would lend itself to apologetic use if required.

### THE LITERARY EVIDENCE

We have now traced explicit, implicit or possible apologetic material dispersed widely over the Books of Samuel (and on into 1 Kings). If all this material were as strongly and explicitly apologetic in character as Samuel's speech in 1 Samuel 12, with which we started our investigation, then the sheer quantity of it would be remarkable. But it is plainly not all of a piece; it varies considerably in its apologetic effect and value. This fact suggests that we are investigating a *redactional* phenomenon. That is to say, the purposes of his individual sources may

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have varied considerably, but the compiler has selected materials time and time again which have the effect of protecting the reputations of all and his chief characters. He can hardly have failed to see the apologetic import of the history of David's rise; and if we are to believe standard critical orthodoxy regarding the Deuteronomist, Samuel's powerful apologia in 1 Samuel 12 was the Deuteronomist's own composition and reveals his own thinking. An apologetic concern can scarcely be denied him.

### THE FUNCTION OF APOLOGETIC

The prophet Samuel is a special case. Although, as we have seen, the description of his early years could be assessed in apologetic terms, his explicit apologia is of course placed at the end of his career as Israel's sole leader. His hands were clean, whereas the monarchy—as his apologia predicted—would produce a very different style of leadership, marked by oppression, etc. The role of the prophet is certainly set on a lofty pinnacle by the books of Samuel.

What, however, are we to make of the apologetic material vis-à-vis Saul, David and Solomon? Where identified as such, it has usually been interpreted *politically*. Thus, the history of David's rise would have been political propaganda for David's cause during his struggle with Ishbosheth or the early years of his reign in general. Similarly, the Succession Narrative may conceivably have been political propaganda for Solomon's cause, as he tried to unite his kingdom behind him in the early part of his reign. The difficulty with such an interpretation is that it limits the thrust, even the value, of each of these major biblical sections to a very short space of time. In Solomon's reign, who would have cared how David had risen to the throne? (Or should one suppose that a strong Saulide faction still existed?) After the division of the kingdom, who cared how Solomon had risen to the throne? (Arguments against such an early dating can be made: even Robert Gordon tentatively makes them.<sup>6</sup>)

Another important consideration is that the apologetic is not total. The Saul whose reputation is protected initially then turns into something of a monster. Even David, who is treated sympathetically throughout, is very far from being whitewashed in the Succession Narrative. And in 1 Kings, Solomon's reign ends badly, though that, 'takes us well beyond the books of Samuel.

A more helpful approach may be to look for the redactor's theological values in the varied apologetic materials. Again, let us re-emphasise the point that part of the purpose of the books of Samuel was to explain the past. The period had seen major changes, and was of a very different character from the Judges period before it. Had Yahweh raised an Eli, a Samuel, a Saul, a David to lead his people? But if so, why the disasters

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and problems? Why had Saul successfully pushed back the Philistines—only to perish at the disastrous Battle of Gilboa? Why had David gone from victory to victory, success to success—only to have the last part of his reign plagued by revolts, one of them extremely serious? Why had Solomon's grandeur collapsed into a broken kingdom? Had Yahweh, in fact, chosen the wrong men?

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<sup>6</sup> R. P. Gordon, *1 and 2 Samuel: A Commentary* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1986), 44.

When we consider such questions as these, the likelihood arises that for the redactor, writing long after any opposition to any of these rulers had ceased to exist or be politically relevant, the apologetic is not so much intended to protect their reputations as to protect that of Yahweh.

Monarchy as such is presented equivocally or ambiguously in the books of Samuel; but each of Israel's first three monarchs is portrayed as a gift from Yahweh to Israel. Thus there seems to be an important distinction drawn between the institution and the man.

The point is made in effect that all of these leaders in Israel started with a *carte blanche*: Yahweh had promoted to leadership men of unsullied reputation. They had previously done no man any harm; and perhaps even more important, none of them had been ambitious for leadership.

Samuel had been 'waiting in the wings' at Shiloh since boyhood, but he was not there by his own choice, and of course his prophetic powers were a pure gift from God—which took him by surprise. Saul was an innocent abroad, looking for donkeys, not a kingdom. David was a youthful shepherd boy, suddenly anointed by Samuel to the surprise of everyone. And even Solomon did not seize his father's throne: 1 Kings 1 makes it clear firstly that he had been nominated beforehand by his father, and secondly that he himself took little action in the counter-coup against his brother Adonijah. The chief instigator of the coup was Nathan the prophet, aided by Bathsheba and Zadok. The impression is indeed given that Solomon himself would have done nothing to prevent Adonijah's becoming king. Solomon's firm action against rivals came after his coronation, not before.

In every generation, then, Yahweh had not only overruled to benefit his people, but had provided them with rulers of the right character and calibre, and with every potential for success. Pharaoh in Egypt is not the paradigm here; no king of Israel had his heart so hardened by Yahweh that he was inexorably led into disasters which crushed his people along with him. Nor did Yahweh decide in advance to remove leadership from the house of Eli or the house of Saul; it was in consequence of their own actions that things went wrong, both for them and for Israel. And so for each of Israel's leaders there is a sort of honeymoon period, after which comes a turning point in their careers.

We react nowadays in different ways to the sins recorded of them—we all judge David's murder of Uriah harshly, but most modern readers feel some sympathy with Saul and find it difficult to judge him as

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harshly as Samuel, and the biblical text did. Possibly (if we are to believe some of the 'close readings' of the text that have become popular in recent Old Testament criticism) even the first readers would have been puzzled or disturbed by some of Yahweh's decisions and actions; but the redactor at least never doubted that the very facts of history proved that Yahweh had indeed taken such decisions and carried them out. All these kings had failed at some point or points in their reign, and Israel had suffered in consequence. For that Yahweh could not be blamed; his verdicts were just, even though his sentences were react sometimes surprising. But in each of these generations, Yahweh had needs for leadership and deliverance, and had reacted to his people's stepped in with a 'new thing', a new man, and had wiped the slate clean on the past sins of the people.

The savage portrait of a typical human king set out in 1 Samuel 8 depicts him for ever taking and grasping; by contrast the divine king (whom the Israelite elders were rejecting by their demands) is portrayed throughout the books of Samuel as one who always gave, and time and time again, forgave.