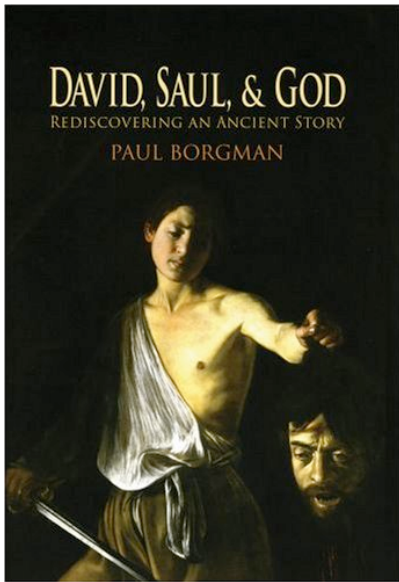


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Borgman, Paul

David, Saul, and God: Rediscovering an Ancient Story

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Deconstruction was all about arguing that ultimately a text does not hang together. Paul Borgman, however, works from quite different assumptions, at least when it comes to the rich biblical material he addresses here. Although well-acquainted with both biblical criticism and literary theory, he judges 1 and 2 Samuel to be neither a collection of diverse and often antithetical sources (*pace* the historical-critical method) nor a text at odds with itself (*pace* the deconstructionists). Instead, he finds in this depiction of Israelite history stretching from the time of the judges to the Davidic monarchy a single highly conscious, progressively developed, and beautifully unified story.

What drives the narrative forward, moreover, is a single question posed four times throughout 1 and 2 Samuel: Who is David? The answer, as Borgman shows, is complex, puzzling, but finally clear: David is everything that Saul is not, and everything that God loves—despite the fact that the sweet singer of Israel is also an adulterer who sends a virtuous husband to his death, an indulgent father who allows his sons to wreck havoc with his kingdom. David, in other words, poses a mystery, albeit one “solved by the end of the story” (205). Both the mystery of the character, and its “solution” by careful reading of the text, are what the author aims to elucidate.

Borgman, who has also written studies of Genesis and the Gospel according to Luke, is a Professor of English with a particular interest in the art of biblical narrative: all three of his books include the word “story” in their titles. He is not a Hebrew scholar who can mine the resources of the original language. Rather, as his full and often discursive footnotes show, he makes good use of the textual work of others who are professionally based in Hebrew Bible: Robert Alter, Walter Brueggemann, J. P. Fokkeman, Moshe Garsiel, Baruch Halpern, Herbert Klement, Robert Polzin, Meir Sternberg. (The poet Robert Pinsky, author of *The Life of David*, adds a creative writer’s flavor to the biblicist mix.) Like these scholars, Borgman shares a respect (and love for) the great literary power of the David story, for its coherence and dramatic integrity. Like them, too, he finds detailed patterning within the text. Specifically, he identifies twelve interlocking patterns that, through repetition and often triple reappearance, guide the listener/reader to understand why the thrice-anointed Saul could never succeed as king and why David is always the apple of God’s eye no matter what he does. Whereas Saul falls victim to a repetition compulsion—he does the same wrong things over and over—David changes, learns, grows, becomes the king of Israel the Lord needs him to be.

These frequent instances of patterned mirroring within the text culminate in a “chiastic conclusion.” Instead of following others who see 2 Sam 23 and 24 as an added-on appendix coming from another source, a “narrative irrelevance,” Borgman argues that they are an integral part of the whole story. He marvels at how the biblical author makes careful use of ring composition—A, B, C, C*, B*, A*—so that these two chapters make a heightened contrast between David’s blamelessness before God and Saul’s guilt, between David’s masterful leadership and Saul’s failures to lead, and (in two adjacent poems attributed to David), between Saul’s disasters vis-à-vis the Lord and “the happy synergy of David’s God-devotion and political acumen.”

What are these interlocking patterns that Borgman and others before him have discovered (though perhaps without his systematic reckoning)? As he works through 1 and 2 Samuel, Borgman notes the biblical writers’ penchant for threes: Saul’s anointings, David’s introductions within the narrative, his sparing of an enemy. The ark of the Lord is lost, found, and then put into its proper Jerusalem place. David sins, experiences remorse, and is restored. The story advances, in other words, by continuously looking backward, by sustained comparisons and contrasts, by reinforcement and variation. As a result, we sense that within the apparent chaos of historical events—the sheer welter of messy, often violent human experience—there is a force at work, a divinity (to recall Hamlet) that shapes our ends, rough hew them though we may.

Occasionally, as with J. P. Fokkeman (though mercifully not at his four-volume length), Borgman’s penchant for order and detail can bewilder a reader: “The two patterns—the

concluding chiasm (pattern 10) and this pattern of David's sinning (pattern 11)—interlock in a very clear way, in that the theme 1* of pattern 10 is also, as mentioned, the fourth instance of pattern 11” (205). Fortunately, however, Borgman's text is written in very readable prose, and the forest of patterns to be found with increasing complexity as the story moves to its conclusion are mapped by the helpful charts that appear at the conclusion of the chapters.

I found *David, Saul, and God* a fascinating book that will transform the way I teach this extraordinary material. Thanks to Borgman, I will see it, and its narrative sophistication, in refreshingly new ways. I do, however, have my doubts about his central point: that the character of David is finally resolved into virtue and his mystery “solved.” Borgman draws this conclusion through the sustained contrast with Saul. Whereas the one man can never learn from his mistakes, the other, also prone to error, delights the Lord by recognizing and repenting his faults. Therefore, loving God, and being loved by him, means always saying you are sorry, admitting your guilt—even in so startling a limit case as the end of 2 Samuel, when David and his people are severely punished for taking the census that God commands the king to take.

In an attempt to justify the ways of God, other scholars have found reasons why David does wrong when after all he is following God's command; 1 Chr 21:1 even makes it Satan who orders the people to be numbered, not God at all. Borgman, however, celebrates the puzzling text we have and therefore the fact that David confesses his guilt without prompting, as well as without any Job-like *Sturm und Drang*—even if he incurs guilt by obediently following orders. This, then, is the “solution” to the mystery of how a blameworthy character becomes blameless before the Lord. “What God has seen in David that pleases the divine heart is on full display in a human partner who is committed to justice (II, 8:15) and to fearless, self-scrutinizing confession” (216). Yet I wonder if this homiletic closure to the David story really “solves” the problems of the story we read. It feels like too neat and comforting a theological conclusion for so thorny a text.

Are mysteries ever solved in great literature, or deeply drawn characters, like the wonderfully slippery David, ever fully or finally understood? Their depths “may forever beg for review, exploration, and answers,” as Borgman says of David, but I doubt there will ever be definitive answers to the questions they raise or, for that matter, patterns that satisfactorily enfold or explain them. Does Shakespeare ever solve Hamlet or Lear, or Henry James his Isabel Archer? Such figures (and David among them) *remain* mysteries. Their rough edges refuse to be smoothed down; they are always in some sense unknown—figures who cannot ultimately be figured out. Thus, Saul may forever be in the wrong, as Borgman shows, but that fact does not cut him off from pathos or from the reader's sense that he has been unfairly done in. And might not God “stand by his man” not because of

self-scrutiny and justice but only because he is in love with him (as is just about everyone else)?

I am hesitant, therefore, about the idealization of David that Borgman comes to in the end. After all, think of what we find in the opening chapters of 1 Kgs 2:1–4. There we watch first as the dying king talks in the lofty tones of the Deuteronomist, delivering a theological adieu that nails everything down into patterns of act and consequence—if you do this, then that. But then, as if one death scene could not contain so multitudinous a character as David, we turn on a “Moreover” to hear the expiring king speak in quite another voice as he handily dispatches his still-living enemies by letting his lethal wishes for them be known. Robert Alter has likened David to a Mafia don instructing his “family” in what he wants done as soon as he breathes his last. The analogy to *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos* is useful in reminding us of the amount of blood that has been spilled in David’s story before our hero’s demise—blood that will continue to flow even after the monarch’s white head descends to Sheol, for as long as anyone in his divided household wields a sword or wears a crown. Our last look at David, in other words, reveals both patriarch *and* don. The death-bed David given us by this masterful storyteller is not one but both—an ambiguous character who resists a resolution even at the end of the tale. I am not sure, therefore, that “In coming to know David,” as Borgman says in his closing line, “we have come to understand the story’s God as well.” I continue to scratch my head over both, but with greater respect for the teller of the tale thanks to Borgman’s careful work.