To the already broad array of books on King David and the biblical traditions on him, Jacob Wright has added an interesting and intriguing volume. In his analysis of the pertinent material, Wright basically applies two methodical approaches. On the one hand, he reads the texts with the redaktionsgeschichtliche model in mind. This implies that narrative irregularities are explained as traces of an ongoing process of reworking and editing the traditions. On the other hand, he construes the various redactions as expressions of a religious and political identity. The memories on David were modeled and remodeled over time parallel to shifting views on leadership, court, and nation.

Wright’s argument takes a surprising start. In his view, the traditions on the two first kings, Saul and David, were transmitted independently of each other. In the History of David’s Reign/Rise (HDR), no mention would have been made about Saul, as in the History of Saul’s Reign/Rise (HSR) David did not play a role. In the HDR, a composition dated by Wright in the eighth century, David was memorialized as a mercenary who built a chiefdom with Hebron as its center based on loyalty with his companions in victory. In the period between the fall of Samaria and the sack of Jerusalem, the HDR was combined with the HSR. Interpolating sections of the HSR in the HDR, the narrative flow shifted
and the image of David changed. He was now presented as the rightful successor to the Israelite throne and as a king who reigned in Jerusalem “after God’s heart.” In the Assyrian period this text functioned to sustain the claim of the Davidic dynasty in Jerusalem that Judah was the real Israel. In a later stage this story was incorporated into the Monarchic History: a story on Israel and Judah living in the promised land. This story emphasizes the importance of the Judahite court for the existence of the people of God. Contrary to that, the People’s History (Genesis–Joshua), having its roots in Israel, stresses the importance of nonroyal people. When after the exile the Monarchic History and the People’s History were joined into a National History, the role of David—and of kingship as a whole—was relativized. This is understandable in the Persian period, when the dream of a restoration of the Davidic house faded away.

Wright correctly notes that the memories on David especially in the older parts are filled with an abundancy of details. Next to the main protagonists, a great number of persons and places play a role in the unfolding of the plot. Traditional interpretations of the book of Samuel have construed this feature as evidence for an early composition: the numerous details would hint at eyewitness reports of the events. Wright takes a different avenue. He connects these details with the genre of war memorial. These war memorials, written texts as well as monuments, display “until this day” a great number of names. The function of this enumeration is connected with the categories of belonging and loyalty. Historically, the kingdom of Judah should be construed as a patchwork of clans and tribes who during Iron IIA coagulated into a greater political entity. The same process can be detected in Israel and Moab, as Wright correctly remarks. The mention of persons from these various tribes and clans in the HDR functions as a sign that they, too, are to be seen as belonging to Judah. Their imagined loyalty to David marks the identity of these groups and grounds their political claims.

Quite surprisingly, Wright balances his analysis of the memories on David with a set of remarks on the rather enigmatic character of Caleb. The ethnic identity of Caleb is not clear throughout the Hebrew Bible. Sometimes he is seen as connected to the Canaanite clan of the Kenizzites, sometimes he is presented as a real Judean, and sometimes he is seen as of Edomite lineage. According to Wright, this variety reflects the history of the Calebite territory in and around Hebron. The originally Canaanite stronghold became the center of David’s chiefdom but later on was occupied by the Edomites. The HDR presents a very positive memory on Caleb. He was seen as the most important of the spies who scouted the promised land from the south and was later rewarded for that with an important tribal heritage. In the HDR Caleb is memorized as Judahite nobility who maintained an relatively autonomous position in the later coagulated kingdom.
Wright’s view on the memories is complex as well as intriguing. The book is rather full of so many details and insights that the argument sometimes is not easy to follow. I agree with him that the present stories on David are the final result of a process of redaction and application in which competing identities had to be negotiated. Although I would disagree on various details, the model as such is relevant and revealing. My biggest problem has to do with the original nonconnectedness of HDR and HSR. Maybe my days in Sunday school play a part in my diffidence to accept Wright’s proposal. Although he is correct in assuming the Israel and Judah in Iron IIA were separate entities, he himself admits that the population of the central hill lands in Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim were ethnically and culturally connected. In my view, many passages from Samuel that connect Saul and David could be relatively old. Maybe Wright will convince me eventually with a more detailed redaction-historical argument.

David, in his grandeur as well as in his misery, remains an appealing character. The scholarly world should be thankful to Jacob Wright for presenting a fresh perspective on the traditions about this all-too-human pious person.