Coda

The many faces of David

Ask anyone to think of an image of David and they will almost certainly call to mind the sculpture by Michelangelo. The original version is in the Accademia in Florence, with full size copies dotted around that city and elsewhere, including the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. You can also buy kitsch reproductions by the thousand, including David fridge magnets complete with a range of suggestive, removable clothing. We are indeed so familiar with Michelangelo’s image that we forget how surprising it is, as a representation of the young hero. To see a sculpture that is more consistent with the biblical description of a boy shepherd, you might take a few minutes’ walk from the Accademia to the Bargello Palace. There, you can see an earlier bronze statue by Donatello. It shows a younger, more fragile boy, barely past puberty, with a sword in his right hand, and with his left foot resting on the grotesque severed head of Goliath.

There are more persuasive images of David even than this. In the Prado in Madrid, for example, there is a Caravaggio showing David clearly dressed as a farm boy. He is leaning over the giant he has just slain, meditating on his achievement and perhaps on the many other trials that will soon befall him. One such trial is shown in Rembrandt’s magnificent painting ‘David playing the harp before Saul’, now in the Hague. Here, the enfeebled and deranged King Saul leans on his spear while his elfin protégé plays the harp in semi-darkness in the background, in order to soothe his master’s troubled soul. Rembrandt did not have to depict the climax of this episode for us to guess what is going on: ‘And on the next day, an evil spirit of God seized Saul and he went into a frenzy within his house while David was playing as he was wont to, and the spear was in Saul’s hand. And Saul cast the spear, thinking ‘Let me strike through David into the wall’. And David eluded him twice.’ (I Samuel 18: 10–11)

But for one of the most poignant images of David, you do not need to leave the British Isles at all. If you travel to the vale of Clwyd, and visit the parish church at Llanrhaeadr, you will come across a Jesse window dating from 1533: a stained glass picture of the family tree of Jesus, showing his ancestors as far back as Jesse, father of David. The portrait of David, near the bottom of the middle panel, arises directly out of Jesse’s loins. David appears here not as a triumphant lad but as an elderly, care-worn and declining monarch. (The image is reproduced on the cover of this QJM.) He looks at us directly in the face and offers his benediction, clutching his harp perhaps for comfort than more anything else. He certainly seems no longer to have the inclination or even the capacity to play it. This is a David who has lived through the unification of the Israelites and the conquest of Jerusalem, and has seen the cost of it: the defeat and suicide of Saul, the slaying of Jonathan and his brothers, the rebellion and death of David’s own son Absalom, and uncountable further episodes of intrigue, betrayal and carnage. He has almost reached the decrepit stage described in the first book of Kings: ‘And King David had grown old, advanced in years, and they covered him with bedclothes, but he was not warm. And his servants said to him, ‘Let them seek out for my lord the king a young virgin, that she may wait upon the king, and become his familiar, and lie in your lap, and my lord the king will be warm’. And they sought out a beautiful young woman through all the territory of Israel, and they found Abishag the Shunamite and brought her to the king. And the young woman was very beautiful, and she became familiar to the king and ministered to him, but the king knew her not’. (I Kings 1: 1–4)

These sculptures and pictures are of such astounding diversity that it is hard to imagine that they all relate to the same biblical text. Yet the story of David itself may well justify this entire range of visual interpretations. The literary scholar and translator Robert Alter describes the whole saga as ‘probably the greatest single narrative representation in antiquity of a human life evolving by slow stages through time, shaped and altered by the pressures of political life, public institutions, family, the impulses
of body and spirit, the eventual sad decay of the flesh.' He points out the vast number of roles and personae that David takes on as we follow him through the decades of his career: a provincial ingénue and public charmer; a shrewd political manipulator and tough guerrilla leader; a ruthless armchair general who sends a rival to his death in order to marry his widow; a helpless father floundering in the entanglements of his son’s intrigues; a refugee abasing himself before a critic’s curses; a doddering old man bamboozled by one of his wives; and (in a last shocking twist of the story) an implacable seeker of vengeance from his own deathbed.

Alter shows how the narrator of the saga manages to convey an extraordinary depth of character, not just through these changes of personal identity, but also through a masterly use of literary devices. These include allusion, repetition, interior monologue, authorial commentary, and—perhaps most effective of all—carefully calculated reticence. When David’s first wife Michal, for example, is transformed from the loving woman who saved his life, to an embittered onlooker who rages against him when he finally enters Jerusalem, we are left guessing what exactly has brought about her fury. Is it the undignified public spectacle that David has just made of himself, or her jealousy over his success, or her fear that she has been displaced by his other wives, or a lingering sense of loyalty to her father Saul? The text suggests that it could be any or all of these motives, and many others. With so many competing interpretations for such events, we are left with a sense that we can partially but never fully make sense of the actions and individuals that we encounter in history and in life.

One particular moment in David’s life illustrates this point compellingly. Faced with the impending death of his firstborn son by Bathsheba, David refuses to eat and drink for seven days, entreating God to save the child’s life. When the boy dies, David’s servants are afraid to tell him, fearful of how distraught he will become. The story continues: ‘And he understood that the child was dead. And David said to his servants, ‘Is the child dead?’ And they said, ‘He is dead’. And David rose from the ground, and bathed and rubbed himself with oil and changed his garment and came into the house of the Lord and worshipped and came back to his house and asked that food be set out for him, and he ate. And his servants said to him, ‘What is this thing you have done? For the sake of the living child you fasted and wept, and when the child was dead, you arose and ate food?’ And he said, ‘While the child was still alive I fasted and wept, for I thought, ‘Who knows, the Lord may favour me and the child will live’. And now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again?’’ (II Samuel 12: 19–23).

We are faced here, and at many junctures in the story of David, with a profound challenge to our own tendency to see human character as monolithic, consistent, and capable of reduction to a few epithets or principles. It is a tendency that we have inherited from the western literary and philosophical tradition, from Greece onwards. It has been accentuated by the nineteenth century European novel, by positivistic theories of psychology, and by modern popular culture as expressed in the cinema and in soap operas on the radio and TV. As a result, we see things too easily in terms of linear plots or clear moral trajectories. We fail to notice the contradictions, the ambiguities, the gaps and the many possible readings of all that we encounter. In medicine, this same tendency has the effect of deluding us into thinking that we can find simple and final explanations for human phenomena of ineffable complexity and unpredictability. As a corrective, we would do well to remember all the different threads that the narrator manages to weave into the David saga, and the many different visual representations of the man. They are all David.

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References