Introduction

Take the traditional taboos of dinner party conversation (sex, religion and politics) out of the David story and not much remains – except bloodshed, on the battlefield and off it. The story of David is a story about power: about the use and abuse of power in his relations with women (sex), with God (religion) and with officials, vassals or rivals (politics).

The story of David is lengthy. He is a prominent character in the Bible: his name occurs over 800 times in the Old Testament and over 50 times in the New. He is introduced for the first time in 1 Samuel 16 and dominates not just the following 15 chapters of that book, but the whole of 2 Samuel (another 24 chapters), and even the first 2 chapters of the first book of Kings. The story thus spans 42 chapters of Scripture in all.

Apart from Jesus himself, there is no figure in the Christian Scriptures to whom as much narrative space is devoted. The Jesus material may be more than twice as long, but it is one story, told four times. The story of David is one continuous narrative, which falls into two halves. 'The rise of King David' runs from 1 Samuel 16.1 to 2 Samuel 5.10: from his anointing by Samuel to the moment he achieves kingship over all Israel. I have attempted a 'dramatic exposition' of that text in *Walking the Walk: the Rise of King David for Today* (2009). 'The fall of King David' then runs from 2 Samuel 5.11 to 1 Kings 2.11. It is this part of Scripture that is the subject of this book.

The Story of King David's Fall: *Talking the Talk*?

In *Walking the Walk*, I argued that the distinctive characteristic of David's behaviour in his rise to power is his restraint. It is in what he refuses to do, as much as in what he does, that David shows himself to be 'a man after God's own heart' (the phrase is used of David in the Acts of the Apostles 13.22, alluding to 1 Samuel 13.14). He refuses

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to raise his hand against Saul, 'the Lord's anointed', or to grasp at the throne to which he knows God has called him.

This book argues that as king David casts restraint aside and becomes as grasping as any ruler. This is the first reason for the title of this sequel. In popular parlance 'to walk the walk' is to be authentic and to offer 'the real thing'. By contrast merely 'to talk the talk' is to fake something you do not truly possess. The title of this book reflects the fact that David's career as king fails to live up to his impressive early faithfulness to God.

Notoriously it is as king that David sins. True, there are moments when his flaws surface even in the story of his rise to power, but all the most outrageous examples of his frailty occur after he has become king. His adultery with Bathsheba is no isolated incident. Rather it is representative of the whole story of his fall. First, exercising his power inappropriately, David sins; then, confronted with his sin, he repents wholeheartedly. This is the second reason for the title of this book: in the simplicity of his contrition, his *words* of confession, David remains a model of faithfulness to God. 'Talking the talk' in this sense has more positive connotations.

Thirdly, the title draws attention to a significant feature of the biblical text. Relative to the first half of David's story, the second is especially rich in dialogue. This dialogue has an important dramatic (and therefore theological) function. It is mostly through dialogue that the personalities of the bible characters are fleshed out; and this is often how the narrative discloses the will of God. It is a rare thing in any biblical story-telling for God to speak or act directly. Usually the purpose of God is not explicit. It has to be inferred, and it is often the sections of dialogue which make this inference possible. It is as the characters speak of the Lord (or fail to speak of him) that some sense is conveyed of what the providence of God might be.

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The Story of King David's Fall: Private Citizen or Public Servant?

It has become something of a given in contemporary western countries that the conduct of a person's private life has no bearing on their fitness for public office (at least in politics). It is thought to be self-evident that a man is not necessarily an untrustworthy custodian of the nation's purse, for example, just because he has cheated on his wife.

The Bible has a different take on this question. It looks for a greater degree of coherence in a person and assumes that a common set of values will shape both public and private behaviour. It is not always in

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the public interest for the domestic details of public servants to be made known and the life of David illustrates the extent to which a person in office needs privacy. But the Bible does suggest it is a healthy thing when a person achieves a measure of integration between their public and private roles. It may be helpful to distinguish the two, but they are not to be separated. In fact they cannot be easily disentangled.

The issue goes to the heart of what this part of the Bible is about. Is it only a morality tale with lessons for individuals engaged in a spiritual quest, and especially for Christian believers in their quest of discipleship; or is it just a piece of dynastic propaganda, designed to legitimise a claim to the throne of Israel by one house over another? Is this a story about personal peccadilloes or about political principles, about a private citizen or a public servant?

The answer of course is that it is both. More than that: part of the point of this story is precisely the interplay between these two apparent alternatives. This is undeniably a story about David as a king: establishing his reign, facing rebellion, finding allies, dealing with opponents, struggling to secure the succession. But equally it is about David as a man: establishing a family, facing bereavement, finding friendship, dealing with conflict, struggling to secure a good death. But it is especially a story about the extent to which his life as a husband and father impacted on his role as a king; about the extent to which his life as a king impacted on his role as a husband and a father; and about how his relationship with God impacted (and failed to impact) on both roles.

In this book the story of David's fall is divided into four Acts. Act One (2 Samuel 5.11-8.18) tells how David prospered in the early part of his reign. Act Two (2 Samuel 9-20) is often called 'the Succession Narrative', as if it dealt only with the question of who would sit on David's throne after him. But these chapters are as much about the private citizen as they are about the public servant: indeed, it is an oddity about this part of the story, that so little attention is given to David's military prowess, to his tactical genius in war or international diplomacy. The narrative is much more interested in his personal issues. His adultery with Bathsheba occurs in this section; and in the account of the rebellion of Absalom, the focus of the text is as much on the difficulties this creates for David the father as it is on the difficulties it creates for him as a king. His grief for his sons when they die is a key element in this section, as is his failure to discipline them while they are alive. Act Three (2 Samuel 21-24) consists of a carefully structured appendix to the narrative proper. Act Four (1 Kings 1.1 to 2.11) brings down the curtain on the drama as a whole

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with an account of David's demise and death. References in the text which are simply to chapter and verse (e.g., 19.12) are always to the second book of Samuel (e.g., 2 Samuel 19.12).

If there is a single question which the story sets out to answer, it is not, as it was once fashionable to argue, 'Who will succeed David on his death?'. This fails to account for great swathes of material. A more adequate way of framing the central question is, 'How are the purposes of God for Israel worked out through the humanity of the king?'; or 'What has the example of David to teach the person who aspires to serve God – particularly the person who is called to public office?'. In either case, the focus in the narrative on David's contrition is a significant part of the answer.

The Story of King David's Fall: 'A Dramatic Exposition'

The story of David is sometimes described as 'the David cycle'. There are similar cycles of stories in the Bible, for example about Joseph (in Genesis 37-50) and about Elijah (in 1 Kings 17-2 Kings 2). A 'cycle' is a series of connected and continuous narratives about a central figure, in which the component parts nevertheless have their own coherence and integrity – like episodes in a TV drama series (or individual plays in a 'cycle' of 'Medieval Mysteries').

This is how the David story is approached in the chapters that follow. Each 'episode' is treated as a drama in its own right, made up often of several distinct 'scenes'; but with attention to its place in the unfolding of the narrative as a whole. The narrative sequence and chronology are respected – and interrogated for meaning. (In a similar vein, see my exposition of Genesis 37-50 in *Living the Dream: Joseph for Today* (2007).)

Generally speaking, a chapter in this book corresponds to a chapter of the biblical text. In each chapter special effort has been made to follow the contours of the Bible passage, attending carefully to its shape and structure. The text has been read realistically, marking its literary details. Like a novel, this text has to be taken at face value if its meaning is to be distilled. There has been a certain amount of reading between the lines of the text, but always with the aim of enabling the narrative to have its full impact.

To assist in this task, the biblical text is printed together with the commentary. The translation is the 'anglicized' *New Revised Standard Version* – chosen for the balance it achieves between a closeness to the Hebrew text and a fluency of contemporary English.

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But what is offered here is also a Christian theological exposition. This does not mean that in the following chapters every opportunity has been taken to draw parallels between David and Jesus. There is a long tradition of this kind of 'typology' in the church. Instead, this book asks what the Word of the Lord might be through this story today, and attempts to answer the question 'in the light of Christ'. What do we learn from this text, in other words, given the nature of God as he has made himself known in Jesus Christ? In the concluding paragraphs of each chapter I have tried to indicate – with the interests of preachers particularly in mind – the lines along which each episode might be applied today.

There is little here in the way of interaction with other interpreters of the text (there are no footnotes) or with current academic scholarship. During the last two hundred years or more, much has been written about the development of this text as part of the biblical canon. It is clear that the text has a history: it took shape over time, almost certainly at first in an oral culture as a spoken tale. It wasn't written in a single sitting by a single author. But the form it now has, it has had for at least two thousand years, and what is offered here is a reading of the text in this form. Readers wishing to pursue questions of source criticism should turn to the standard commentaries. In particular where this book comments on the Hebrew text, its observations are derived from the insights of others.

In my own reading of the story I have been especially helped by the interpretations of Robert Alter, Walter Brueggemann, John Goldingay and Ralph Davis – and readers who know their work will doubtless discern my indebtedness, which I am glad to acknowledge. I would also like to reiterate my heartfelt thanks to Cathy, Jonathan and Tom. More than anyone else, they influence the way in which I read the Bible.

This book is dedicated with gratitude and all my love to my parents, David and Pam Wilcox. They have modeled for me, and for many others over the years, the way of restraint and contrition.

Pete Wilcox
Lichfield Cathedral
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