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A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

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pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

The Character of David.

By Professor Ross G. Murison, M.A., B.D., University College, Toronto.

In the popular mind the prominent men of the Old Testament story are generally grouped in two great classes—the very good and the very bad. In the one case the evil, in the other the good traits or actions are neglected or explained away. For example, one seldom hears a good word spoken of Balaam and Saul, while David and Solomon are regarded as wonderful saints. Lot and Jacob are almost the only persons of importance in the Old Testament about whom tradition is not firmly decided.

The character of David is certainly much more complex than common repute would make it. Had it not been so, he could never have impressed his memory on the imagination, reverence, and love of his nation as he did. Taking the story in Samuel as our authority for the life of the great king, we see a strange mixture of good and evil, of royal virtues and human frailties. David was a great and a good king, for his character was strong in the qualities which make a king successful and great; while its weaknesses, though many and heinous, were not such as at that time and in that environment would greatly detract from his authority or his reputation.

His greatness and enduring fame certainly began with and rested upon the remarkable generalship which he manifested throughout his whole career. Personally very brave, often foolhardy, he inspired the entire confidence of all his followers. But a courageous and successful commander may have the confidence of his troops, and yet, because of the coldness of his manner be like the Iron Duke, a thing apart. It was quite different with David, in whose character the most outstanding trait was a magnetic power of winning the affection of those who came into close contact with him, and in keeping them devoted to his person. Saul 'loved him greatly,' until he saw where the ambition of his favourite pointed. Jonathan 'loved him as his own soul,' and continued to do so in spite of his knowledge of David's ultimate aim (1 S 20^{31}). His devoted men braved great dangers to give him a little pleasure, for which he has casually expressed a desire (2 S $23^{15.16}$). Joab, his right-hand man, one who feared neither God nor man, loved him with a fierce devotion which never wavered. 'All Israel and Judah loved David' (1 S 18^{16}); and when he appeared among the people after the rebellion of Absalom was crushed 'he bowed the heart of all the men of Judah.' This 'lovableness' gives the key to much in the character of David, for it could have its origin only in a certain charm of manner in him, and in kindly sympathy and thoughtfulness. It is this trait in his character which has surrounded his memory with a halo of love and devotion, as well as of reverence.

David had the necessary qualifications of a great statesman, shrewdness, common sense, and a knowledge of human nature. The latter he gained in the eventful period of his youth. His statesmanship is seen in his conquest of Jerusalem, and its establishment as his capital; and, more clearly still, in his actions looking to the union of the two divisions of the people into one kingdom on a friendly basis. His execution of the assassins of Ishbosheth; his lament for Saul and Jonathan; his mourning for Abner; and his kindness to Mephibosheth were all measures to placate the Northern Hebrews, and incline them to accept David as king. These actions, as also his sparing of Saul, do manifest a kindly disposition, a magnanimous mind, and yet they were strokes of statesmanship, and were, one is inclined to think, meant to be so. His affectionate disposition is also manifested in his mourning for his infant son, and for Absalom. David had a very strong sense of justice; his decision that the spoil should be equally divided among those who were forced to stay behind is a clear proof of this, as is also his answer to Nathan's accusation. There are also glimpses of a humility very rare among Oriental princes (2 S $16^{11.12}$, 23^{17}).

But there is a reverse to the shield. The innocent youth out on the hillside, herding his father's flocks, meditating on the wondrous works of God, and breathing forth his devotion in unexcelled verses, is but a beautiful imagination with no foundation in the Bible story.

After the rupture between the king and Samuel, the leader of the prophetic party, the prophet incited David, whose ability he discerned, to aspire

to the throne (1 S 16[13]). Saul, a shrewd man of affairs, soon discovered at least David's share in the plot, and the young man had to flee for his life to the recesses of the mountains, where his prowess soon placed him in command of a gang of freebooters, the scum of the country (1 S 22[1]). David is not altogether to be blamed for this highwayman stage in his career; it was probably the only course open to him, and naturally all the outlaws would gather around a revolutionary leader of ability. Even in his lawlessness he evidently has some ideals, for he established a system of blackmail similar to that of Rob Roy, and for certain payments would insure farmers against pillage (1 S 25[1ff.]).

In spite of the inherent kindliness of his character, David was utterly untrustworthy, unscrupulous, and cruel when it served his purpose to be so. To 'lie' oneself successfully out of difficulties has always been regarded in the East as the highest diplomacy. Samuel has no hesitation in circulating a false report about the cause of his visit to the house of Jesse, and David certainly availed himself of this 'liberty to lie' with great skill. He lies to his brothers in the camp; he furnishes Jonathan with a falsehood to tell Saul; he lies to the trusting priests of Nob, and is thus the cause of their massacre; he pretends madness at Gath, and on other occasions shows his 'trickiness.' The times may give some justification of these tricks, but it is much more difficult to excuse his cruelties. Because of the refusal of Nabal to pay blackmail, David intended to massacre all his household (1 S 25[34]), and the tortures to which he put the Ammonites quite late in his career appear to us the very essence of cruelty (2 S 12[31]). Whatever 'apology' may be brought forward to defend the complete slaughter of conquered enemies, no excuse can be offered for David's massacre of the Geshurites, Girzites, and Amalekites (1 S 27[7ff.]). This raid is worse than Turkish atrocities, for here there is not the palliation of religious differences and ancient enmities. David and his gang, for the sake of plunder, and that alone, fall upon unoffending peoples, and then slay them, men, women, and children, because 'dead men tell no tales.' David, for the time being, has been forced to take refuge with the Philistines, and naturally, he does not want them to hear of his gross breach of faith towards them in plundering their friends. To account for the spoils taken in this raid he lies most bravely. The adventures of David during the freebooter period of his life show a daring resourcefulness, and at times also a grim humour. Had David not succeeded in becoming king, he would certainly have lived long in the traditions of the people as a hero of the Robin Hood or Rob Roy type.

The lovableness and affectionate nature of David were a source of weakness as well as of strength. The weakness is seen in his proneness to fall suddenly and often in love, and unfortunately with him, to love was synonymous with to lust. The marriage relationship was always held in high honour among the Hebrews, but it presented no restraints to David, although he always endeavoured, by fair means or foul, to prevent his *amours* causing him trouble. He falls in love with Abigail, seemingly an estimable woman, and very soon afterwards her husband dies suddenly and mysteriously, and Abigail is added to the harem of David. Even Jewish tradition cannot explain away his dastardly treatment of Uriah. In spite of the fact that this man, a foreigner, is away fighting the battles of Israel, the king sins against his honour. To hide his sin, David sends for Uriah, but that noble soldier will not enjoy the comforts of his house while his comrades are enduring hardships. The king plies him with strong drink, but drunk or sober, Uriah clings to his ideals of soldierly action. Baffled, David can only order what is practically a cowardly assassination.

It may be said that here we have an example of a good man falling through sudden temptation, but such a fall would be psychologically impossible had David been a man of high ideals for even his own time. That he was not is seen by the case of Abigail, and very clearly by Joab's estimate of the character of his king, when he sent word to him of the death of Uriah.

Was this, however, the turning-point in his life, and did the rebuke of Nathan bring him to repentance? We should like to believe that it was so; but the Bible story reveals few marks of true repentance. The king certainly did not remove Bathsheba, who was also guilty; but she remained to the end of his life the most dominant member of his harem, and exercised a great influence over him.

After the death of Uriah there is little recorded of David which reveals character. Lack of control over children is too common an Oriental failing to be brought against him. The numbering of the

people was a non-moral act. If wrong, it was at most an error in judgment. Orientals to this day cannot understand, and strenuously resent, the taking of a census. When the plague broke out it was in true Semitic manner connected with the detested numbering. Much more serious is his slaughter of the descendants of Saul (2 S 21). Saul realizing that David had a good chance of becoming king, and knowing the most common policy of a usurper, made David take an oath not to slay his children should he become king. In spite of his solemn oath he executed almost all of the descendants of Saul. It is true it is to stop the famine, and is at the instigation of an oracle, supposed to be Jehovah's, but one has an uneasy suspicion that David was pleased to have it so.

In this estimate no account has been taken of the story of the death of David. If his deathbed was as described there, it is one of the saddest deathbeds in history, and at once closes the question of his claim to be regarded as having been at any time of his life a good man. But while David was certainly not an ideal man, we can scarcely believe him to have been so treacherously ungrateful and vindictive as he is here represented to have been. This account was most likely composed in the time of Solomon to justify the policy of that king, who soon after his accession executed all whom he considered might be dangerous. The historian, finding the story among the other 'annals of the kings,' naturally regarded it as historical.

While reluctantly we are forced by a study of the Bible narrative to deny to David that exceptional sanctity with which tradition has clothed him, we must at the same time acknowledge the many estimable traits in his character, and see that as *king* he was a man after God's own heart. David was raised up of God to weld the people together, to give them confidence in themselves, their power, and their future,—a confidence they have never lost,—and to set the nation upon its way as a suitable channel for God's revelation of Himself. The work of David was most important, and was absolutely necessary in the preparation of Israel for the part it was to play in the development of the world. David was not himself a spiritual leader, but his work prepared the way for the prophets, and was performed at a crucial period in the history of Israel.

It is sometimes asked, Had David sufficient spiritual insight to write any truly devotional Psalms. To this question some unhesitatingly answer, 'He had not. His cruelty and licentiousness prove that.' The environment in which he lived, with its moral standards, and also the peculiar constitution of the human mind, must, however, be taken into consideration. That David was a deeply religious man, and truly grateful to God is seen in his enthusiasm for the Ark. While religion was, as a rule, non-moral, and the standards of life low, yet may not David have written hymns which were true for the conditions then, and also true now when given an interpretation in accordance with Christian standards? Both Babylonian and Egyptian hymnology give examples of this to some extent. Again, although not a man of high ideals, may he not have had his moments of longing after better things? Burns certainly fell far short of the standards of an ordinary decent life in his day, and yet some of his poems strike a deeply spiritual note. Why may not the same be true of David? That some of the Psalms ascribed to the poet-king could neither have been penned by him, nor proceed from his time, is certain; yet there seems no good reason for denying to David the power to write true religious poetry.

At the Literary Table.

THE LITERATURE OF THEISM.

SELECTIONS FROM THE LITERATURE OF THEISM. Edited, with Introductory and Explanatory Notes, by Alfred Caldecott, M.A., D.D., and H. R. Mackintosh, M.A., D.Phil. (*T. & T. Clark.* 8vo, 7s. 6d. net.)

WHO would ever have expected so beautiful and delightful a book with such an unpretending commonplace title? Who would have thought that Theism could have been made such a pleasant thing to think about, under any title? The Literature of Theism!—we are not theists, we say, we are Christians; and then, just when we are about to toss the book aside, there catch the eye Cousin's wonderful words about Beauty, and at once we are with Christ. Why did Cousin write so lovingly