The Problem with David: Masculinity and Morality in Biblical Cinema

Kevin M. McGeough

*University of Lethbridge*, mcgekm@uleth.ca

Abstract

The King David of the Bible, and especially as portrayed in the books of Samuel, is one of the most complex characters in ancient literature. We are told his story from his youth as a shepherd until his death as king of Israel. He kills a mighty warrior with a slingshot, goes to war with his king and later his son, and has an affair that threatens to throw his kingdom into disarray. The stories surrounding David seem perfect for cinematic adaptation yet what makes this character so compelling has been problematic for filmmakers. Here, three types of Biblical filmmaking shall be considered: Hollywood epics (*David and Bathsheba* (1951), *David and Goliath* (1960), and *King David* (1985)); televised event series (*The Story of David* (1976) and *The Bible: The Epic Miniseries* (2013)); and independent Christian films (*David and Goliath* (2015) and *David vs. Goliath: Battle of Faith* (2016)). Issues that shall be considered include: tone and genre, casting, democracy and ideology, masculinity, and sexual morality. This investigation shall explore how these issues are treated in different types of Biblical filmmaking and how genre constraints impact the reception of David on film.

Author Notes

Kevin M. McGeough is a Professor in the Department of Geography (Archaeology) at the University of Lethbridge. His research interests include ancient Near Eastern religion, Old Testament, and Biblical reception. He is the author of a three volume work on ancient Near Eastern and Biblical reception, published by Sheffield Phoenix, titled The Ancient Near East in the Nineteenth Century. Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers for their very helpful comments and suggestions.

Biblical King David is arguably one of the most compelling and dynamic figures in ancient literature. The books of Samuel tell us of David's life from the time he was a young shepherd boy until his death as a celebrated king of Israel. These accounts show David in a positive and a negative light, as a figure of heroic achievements and personal failings. The Bible tells us of his rise from humble origins to become a king chosen by God. It tells us of his friendship with Jonathan and his conflicts with his own sons. David is a musician, a warrior, and a statesman. He is the most celebrated king of Israel and yet he is also a murderer and an adulterer. All of this seems like the makings of a riveting film or films and yet, ironically, these traits of the Davidic story have seemed to have caused more problems for filmmakers than opportunities. The root issue, perhaps, has not been the biblical source material, so much, but the expectations of biblical heroes and stories in cinema. For the biblical David does not line up well with the expectancies of masculine heroism that are defined by biblical filmmaking. For cinematic audiences, a biblical hero was not someone with an ambiguous sense of sexual morality nor could he be rewarded for behaving "unheroically". He needed to be able to master violence without savouring it and he needed to be an ardent nationalist, not someone who could engage in open revolt against his own king. This article will explore some of the specific elements of the Davidic narratives that have proven challenging for filmmakers and explore how these problems reflect larger issues relating to the reception of Biblical figures in popular media. In particular, the paper shall examine tone in Biblical film, difficulties in casting David and portraying an aging character, tensions surrounding the character's relationships with violence and the state, as well as the complications in presenting him as a both masculine and moral character, especially in concert with his sexual activities. While there are many films that feature David, this paper shall consider three types of David films: Hollywood epics (*David and Bathsheba* (1951), *David and Goliath* (1960), and *King David* (1985)); televised event series (*The Story of David* (1976) and *The Bible: The Epic*

*Miniseries* (2013)); and independent Christian films (*David and Goliath* (2015) and *David vs. Goliath: Battle of Faith* (2016)).[1]

David in the Books of Samuel

While numerous source critical analyses of the Davidic narratives have been offered by scholars, most generally see the sources as bifurcated between pro and anti Davidic materials.[2] Beyond this basic division, scholars have, since Julius Wellhausen, further divided the Davidic accounts into discrete chronological units revolving around important events in his story (rise to kingship, succession crisis, etc.). However the composition history of the story is understood, the saga of David in its final form offers a picture of a character whose emotional depth is arguably unparalleled in ancient Near Eastern literature. Baruch Halpern well captures the inconsistency of David's character through the provocative title of his book, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King.*[3] David, in the final form of the books of Samuel, is a dynamic figure who acts heroically and selfishly, uprightly and immorally, violently and tenderly. He is a character who defies simple description.

Tone in Epic Biblical Cinema

I have previously argued in reference to the book of Esther that filmmakers have had a difficult time capturing the tone of that book.[4] The humour, the violence, and the carnivalesque mood were not easily transformed into the sombre, historical-realism of the typical Biblical epic. The Davidic saga in Samuel poses fewer problems in regards to tone since its narratives can be treated as historical (even if they are not strictly historical as numerous scholars contend). Babington and Evans have shown that the traditional Hollywood Biblical epic portrays major

turning points in world history, moments of momentous political significance.[5] In Hollywood epics (and the corollary international forms, especially Italian *peplum* films), individual heroic figures play formative roles in changing the course of major political events. Often their romantic lives are entangled with the larger processes of history, where the heroes are forced to make sacrifices for the greater good of their people. The films are shot in a panoramic style that allows audiences to see large troop movements across stunning landscapes but also emphasizes the relationship of individuals to larger historical processes that are greater than their own lives.  Given that generic interest, the stories of David should well fit the expectations  that audiences hold for the epic.

*Realism*

Debates about historicity further complicate scholarly understandings of David. At the time that most of these films were produced, these debates mostly related to attempts to determine  which elements  of  the  story  of  David  were  legendary  and  which  actually happened. It was not until the mid-1990s that the argument that there was never an historical David came to be widespread in academia.[6] Generally then, despite more recent critical academic readings of David's historicity, the filmmakers who have presented his story have taken him to be a real historical figure although have not necessarily understood all of the elements of his story to have an historical basis.  Mainstream films, then, have used an archaeological-realistic aesthetic to portray him as an historical figure. This has not been the case with Christian independent films, which is in keeping with larger trends in that industry.[7]

An ethos of realism has long been a means of marketing historical films, as David Eldridge notes.[8] The subject matter of David films allows for such an archaeological and historically authentic aesthetic. Miracles and supernatural events are not a major part of the account in Samuel and they

can be omitted with minimal injury to the story. As shall be discussed below, the Goliath narrative could be problematic in this fashion but filmmakers have found ways around that. Philip Dunne, who wrote the screenplay for 1951's *David and Bathsheba* wanted to create a Biblical film that was explicitly unlike the miracle-laden films of Cecil B. DeMille. [9] Dunne, who was an agnostic himself, purposefully added a foreword to the film which acknowledged that the script was based on "an anonymous chronicle in the Second Book of Samuel", purposefully pointing to a source within the Bible that he believed constituted a contemporary account of events written as authentic history (despite some of the propagandistic elements).[10] To capture the Biblical voices (since there is little dialogue preserved in Samuel), Dunne attempted to imitate the style of the King James Bible with a slightly modernized flavour.[11]

More archaeologically authentic was the 1976 miniseries, *The Story of David*, for which David Noel Freedman acted as a consultant.[12] Upon Freedman's suggestion, the Philistines spoke a different language and an attempt was made to costume the characters in an archaeologically authentic fashion. Music performed by the characters is limited to that which scholars reconstruct for ancient Israel and reference is made to various biblical social institutions, all which give the program a veristic flavour. For this miniseries, the film-makers have used all of the key signifiers that Adele Reinhartz has noticed Jesus films use to position the movies as historical: location shooting, ancient-seeming costumes, and speaking in other languages.[13]

Christian independent cinema has not approached the Davidic story from an historical-critical perspective probably in part due to budgetary constraints but also because different claims of fidelity to the text are more important to that community. Timothy Chey, the writer and director of *David and Goliath* (2015) told *The Christian Post* that his film would be: "biblically correct in every way" although he acknowledged that he would explore narrative elements not preserved in the Bible. [14] The film is decidedly not an accurate representation of Samuel, as shall be discussed, but for films aimed at conservative American Christians, that may not be what is meant by

"biblically correct." Fidelity to the text is not defined in literary terms so much as through representing a message that is consistent with the current faith community's values. Take for example dove.org's review of *David vs. Goliath: Battle of Faith*, in which the reviewer acknowledges that it departs from the text "but maintains key moments."[15] The film thus receives the site's "Faith-Based seal" (with the caveat that audiences should be over 18 in age) despite the fact that it is unrecognizable in relation to the book of Samuel other than in the names of characters.

*Typological History*

Returning to more mainstream Biblical epics, the problem with tone comes with another element of this genre – its typological nature. For as numerous film scholars have noted, historical epics offer a particular kind of reading of history where the events of the past are shown to mirror the ideologies and values of the present.[16] This method to receiving the past is not all that different from the approach Hans Frei has identified as "pre-critical" in terms of reading Biblical narratives.[17] While most scholars would agree that critical readings also mirror the contemporary ideologies of readers, scholars of reception studies have noted that some of the specific elements identified by Frei are prominent in non- academic readings of the Bible and especially receptions into other popular culture forms.[18] In particular, epic cinematic treatments of Biblical stories resemble pre-critical readings in their presumption of the historicity of the source texts, in their presumption that these ancient "historical" events prefigure events in the future, and in their presumption that the experiences of the ancients mirror the experiences of contemporary audiences.

With the Biblical epics of the 1950s and 1960s, there was a very specific audience to whom these

typological receptions were aimed. Walsh has discussed this presumed audience in depth, pointing to the middle class American protestant family as the main targeted demographic.[19] This is the group whose experiences were considered normative by filmmakers and whose lives were treated as typologically prefigured in the Hollywood

Biblical epics, especially offering reflection on their war-time service. Many of the epics of the 1950s and 1960s feature men who engage in violence and sacrifice themselves for the good of a social order that, while perhaps not actually a Christian liberal democracy, will eventually be transformed into that. When David, in *David and Goliath* (1960), for example, first arrives in Jerusalem, he purchases slaves simply to free them and fights off soldiers who are torturing opponents of Saul's, not because he sides with them but because of his distaste for human rights abuses. He is a champion of liberty; men like this David do not crave violence for its own sake but are capable of engaging in it and stoically perform their duties as masculine heroes. The heroic women in these films provide the moral centers of the films, are faithful to their men and their God, and make sacrifices by supporting their husbands in their military service and thus risk losing happy domestic lives. The parallels for post-war middle-class American life in these films are not subtle nor are they intended to be.

It is this typological normativity that poses problems for treatments of David on film. In terms of historical narrative, the rise of a great king and the origins of an important historical state are perfectly suited to 1950s and 1960s epic cinema. The character of David is the problem though. For as he is portrayed in Samuel, David is not the stoic, reluctant warrior who is faithful to his wife as is expected of the genre. The epic does not offer much room for character development and so the richness of David's character and the moral ambiguity of his actions must be sacrificed in order to meet genre expectations. Richard Francaviglia argues that the epic is a "simplifying genre" – it takes what might be complex stories and characters and presents them in simple terms of good and evil.[20]

Even when attempting to portray moral ambiguity, filmmakers tend to depict characters as either good or bad in specific moments, rather than inhabiting a grey area in between. Take for example *David and Bathsheba,* which reflects an attempt to deviate from the genre to some degree. The screenwriter, Philip Dunne, did not even believe the film was part of the epic genre, describing it as "a modern-minded play which explores the corruption of absolute power and its effect on the character of one of the most colorful and attractive monarchs in all history."[21] This, however, does not make the film any less typological, for Dunne is evaluating his script in reference to its lack of miracles compared to other films. While he may have made a more secular Biblical film than the others of the era, he is still using a Biblical figure as a means for thinking about power in the present. David's character arc of sin and redemption fundamentally offers the kind of moral binary Francaviglia sees as common.

When David is depicted outside of the traditional Hollywood epic or peplum genre, there is more room for creative imaginings of the character since there is either more time to develop him or there are different expectations of fidelity to the text than historical verism. *The Story of David* (1976) was a miniseries shown over two nights, one for each book of Samuel and thus the complexity of the characterization could be captured. For *The Bible: The Epic Miniseries,* produced by Roma Downey and Mark Burnett, a number of elements of the production allowed for deviations from more typical approaches to David. Given the sheer volume of Biblical heroes treated in the series, it would not have been dramatically interesting to portray them all as similar and so an effort is made to highlight key traits in the reception history of these characters. Negative elements are not shied away from in the Old Testament portion of the series. Yet in both cases, exegetical

choices are made to help David better conform to the expectations of a cinematic political hero.

*Faith on Film*

By the 1970s the audience for a Biblical epic was more difficult to sort out. This was before Mel Gibson's *The Passion*, by which time there was a large religiously conservative audience that would embrace a film that offered a conservative theology and politics. When Richard Gere's *King David* came out in 1985, this was not the target audience and so a more cynical stance on organized religion and arguably the state of Israel is apparent than what had been typical of such films in the past. This cynicism is hinted at in two scenes. In the first, the king of the Philistines says to David: "in our country madmen are held to be sacred. Grasp that and perhaps you have grasped the very essence of religion". The Philistine goes on to note the unjustness of Israel in relation to non-Hebrews, perhaps to be taken as a critique of the modern state of Israel as well. True, this is the notorious enemy of Israel speaking but at this point, narratively, the audience is sympathetic to this figure.

David's actions after he learns of the death of Absalom more clearly reflect the king's own perspective. The despondent David is rebuked by Nathan who asks, "When will you learn to obey the Lord your God instead of your emotions?" Immediately after this sequence, we see David destroying a model of the royal citadel of Jerusalem in a fit of anger as a narrator offers a commentary in juxtaposition: "Fear the Lord and serve him in truth with all your heart. Consider the great things He has done for you…. And behold it came to pass that David sinned no more. And the Lord smiled upon his servant David

and strengthened his hand and gave him victory over his enemies wheresoever he went…" Here David seems to be rejecting God in a way that is atypical of his presentation by Samuel and perhaps suggests that there is injustice in this perception of God's behaviour. The message is not very clear but certainly shows David to be questioning God at the end of the film. In the Biblical epics of the 1950s and 1960s this kind of questioning was acceptable towards the beginning of

the film (for the audience can watch the character become a believer), but not as the conclusion.

Christian independent filmmaking also deviates from the expectations of historical epic films produced by mainstream studios. In the cases studied here, these filmed visions of David vary quite dramatically from the biblical account and actually smooth over the difficulties with David's character. If anything, there seems to be no need or desire for fidelity to the text but rather an emphasis on making David's story mirror a faith journey of an American evangelical Christian. In Timothy Chey's *David and Goliath*, David is a shepherd who is absolutely overwhelmed by faith. His sheer rage at the insolence of heathens and his love of God drive his desperation to kill Goliath. It is not God's love for David that is part of the narrative here (like in Samuel) but David's love for God, mirroring the kind of religious experiences of young American evangelical males. Chey explained his intentions to *The Christian Post*:

I want them [the audience] to be moved to tears and increase their faith in the true and living God. I want them to stop being lukewarm. To make a stand for God. To slay the demonic giants who beseech us in this life. I want them to leave the theater and say "I will make a stand for the Lord" and tell those giants "You come against me with sword and spear and

javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God."[22]

David's story is read here as a metaphor for announcing one's own faith to the world and taking a stand for it.

*David vs. Goliath: Battle of Faith* (2016), put out by Faith Warrior Productions, also discusses faith through militaristic metaphors. The film begins with a title card apology admitting that liberties have been taken but that the movie has captured the spirit of David's story. The film has a fantasy – style colour palette and the Holy Land looks much like Middle Earth inhabited by Israelites wearing colourful Orientalist costumes, alongside of Samuel dressed like Gandolph, and Philistines dressed like cavemen. This is a violent film where numerous action sequences featuring graphic hand-to-hand combat propel the narrative. This film bears greater similarity to *Rocky* than any of

the other David films, at least structurally. Samuel seeks out David to teach him how to be a warrior (in this film Samuel is a retired soldier) and most of the middle of the film is about his training (including montages) where David becomes buff and learns to fight. Fighting and training scenes are interrupted for the occasional messages about faith to placate the intended audience.

Casting David

Casting choices have been instrumental in defining what type of David story is being told. Is David a classic Hollywood leading man, a muscle-bound action star, or a meek child seemingly unable to lead a mighty kingdom?  Since Samuel tells us of David's life from his time as a young shepherd boy until his death, filmmakers usually make a decision about what segment of the story to tell. In *David and Bathsheba* (1951), most of the film centres on Gregory Peck as an established King David, with scenes of David as a child presented in flashback at the end of the film. Philip Dunne, who wrote the film, initially pitched it as a trilogy after being assigned the topic of a King David movie by Darryl Zanuck, the legendary executive at 20th Century Fox. Zanuck did not want such a large project and so Dunne decided to focus on the romance story to make the project manageable.[23]

If the film spans his youth and adulthood, movies like *King David* (1985) cast at least two actors to play the role. This solves some problems of the aging of the character but it forces a disruption in the story in order to allow the audience to accept the change  of actor. It is difficult to show the gradual transformation from the shepherd boy who defeats Goliath to the warrior who Saul appoints to lead his army.  Timothy Bottoms makes an admirable attempt to portray this transition in the 1976 television miniseries *The Story of David*. Through changes in the pitch of his voice,

posture, and facial hair, he plays David as both shepherd and warrior. Commercial breaks separate the changes in age and make the transitions less jarring. In the second episode, which corresponds with the second book of Samuel, he is played by Keith Michell, who portrays the character in a less favourable light. Thus there are two Davids, the heroic youth and the gluttonous king skilled at scheming. Here the complexity of the character is captured in a manner that is easier for audiences to handle. Rather than the mixed treatment of David found throughout the Bible, audiences could watch the good David on the first night and the morally ambiguous David on the second night.

*David and Goliath* (1960) only presents the early story of David and so merely one actor is cast, the Croatian actor Ivica Payer (credited as Ivo Payer). In our first view of David in this film, he is topless, showing off his musculature and demonstrating his skills with the sling for his love interest. Here is young David as the bodybuilder hero and throughout the film he wears the same kinds of costumes as the stars of the earlier Tarzan films and the Italian Hercules films. He is not a small shepherd boy but a muscular young athlete, with a physique that seems Davidic in the Michelangelesque sense.

A more romantic, rather than body-building David, was perhaps intended for 1985's *King David*. For audiences today, Richard Gere cast as King David seems immediately cringe worthy. Indeed, he was nominated for the Golden Raspberry for Worst Actor of 1985 (but lost out to Sylvester Stallone who "won" for his dual efforts in *Rocky IV* and *Rambo: First Blood Part II*). In retrospect the casting seems bizarre but the logic behind choosing Gere for the role seems sound given his work up until that time. His roles in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977), *American Gigolo* (1980), and *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982) suggested that he could readily play a romantic lead of the heroic sort, the roguish sort, and the unhinged sort and if he could do all three simultaneously, that might well capture Samuel's David. In *King David*, however, the plot does not center on David's romantic life, as might have been a natural fit with Gere's casting, nor did the script allow for the character to have this kind of complexity.

David, Democracy, and Legitimate Leadership

Casting is one problem but perhaps more fundamentally difficult is capturing the anti- statist perspectives of Samuel in a cinematic genre that is fundamentally conservative. While the Old Testament offers apologies for David's actions, and adds editorial glosses that argue for his fidelity to Saul, the diagetical logic of the narrative seems to contradict this. One of the hallmarks of the Biblical epic is the rumination on legitimate forms of state authority. Often these films show characters struggling against tyrannical forms of government and while not achieving liberal democracy in these movies, the films establish teleologies in which liberal democracies will eventually emerge as divinely ordained polities. The issue of treason is a topic that is dealt with delicately in such films. New Testament films like *The Robe* portray Christians as underground freedom fighters. *Spartacus*, perhaps most famously, is the story of a slave revolt told from the perspective of the slave leader. So it is not that treason itself is not depicted on film. What makes David difficult is that he is not a member of an oppressed group nor does his revolt lead to a new form of governance; he becomes a king himself. And, as Erin Runions has pointed out, the kind of monarchical government that David becomes leader of is a type of government to which American Hollywood cinema has been particularly critical.[24] Given these tendencies, how does a Biblical film make a character who goes to war with his king and later his own son seem heroic? David's rise to power has already occurred in the Gregory Peck film but offhand references and flashbacks show Saul to have been a problematic figure and that David's kingship was thrust upon him, almost against his will. During David's first onscreen discussion with Michal (his queen and Saul's daughter), Peck's David expresses discomfort with having taken the throne after Saul. David states: "We both know that royalty is a fraud," to which Michal responds: "It

was no fraud when my father was king." Rather than disputing the point, David acknowledges: "And I've never denied that Saul

was every inch a king". Michal angrily follows up with a slight: "And his successor every inch a fraud." David's own self-doubts are revealed by his response: "I will not argue that either." The weight of kingship sits heavily on David throughout the film, and, during his courtship of Bathsheba, he explains that he has never taken anything by force: "Even Israel, I refused the throne until every elder of every tribe had come to me and begged me to take it."  At the end of the film, the audience sees Saul's character as king in a flashback sequence in which Saul purposefully sends David (clearly a child not a young man) to his death at the hands of Goliath, explaining that the boy's failure to defeat the Philistine will prove that Samuel's prophecy is meritless. Even though the audience knows that David will be successful, that Saul would send a boy to his death to prove a political point comes across as unconscionable.

*David and Goliath* (1960) gets around this issue by ending the film before  David's war with Saul. As the mob clearly chants in support of David and in argument that he should be king, David rushes to the podium upon which Saul stands and proclaims: "Long live Saul." Saul, in the booming voice of Orson Welles responds by standing next to David and telling the crowd and the audience that David "will do great things." Those great things shall simply not be shown in this film. It may be that the screenwriters never figured out precisely what to do with the Saul-David relationship as it is presented inconsistently. Orson Welles, who directed his own scenes, may also have had a part in making the continuity of the relationships incoherent. For example, in his first entrance into Jerusalem in the film, David rallies the people around him against Saul. Incomprehensibly, Saul accepts him into his court as a musician immediately following this, and David's opposition to the king subsides.

The 1976 television miniseries goes to great pains to demonstrate Saul's madness and desperation to kill David. When Samuel first tells David that he must overthrow Saul, David is apoplectic about

the prospect, arguing that even though he has tried to slay him, Saul is king and Jonathan is his brother. David even asks Jonathan to kill him if he believes that the shepherd turned warrior is actually a threat to the house of Saul. There is absolutely no hint of seditious motivation in any of David's actions. Later, teary-eyed, David insists that Jonathan will be the next king of Israel. Other characters bait him and confront him about not attacking Saul and David insists that he is not a rebel and he stands fast to his fidelity, even preventing a man from killing the sleeping king (as in 1 Sam 26). David insists that an evil spirit from Yahweh has infected Saul and someday God may cause him to die, but it will not be by David's hand.

After the rapprochement between David and Saul, David goes undercover in Philistia, pretending to be an enemy of Saul's but really working on behalf of the king, dramatizing I Sam 27-29. The film grapples with problems that commentators have had with the text by making it clear that David is actually working for Saul, a reading that is not implied in the source material. Rather, the text of I Samuel seems to be apologizing for David's venture with the Philistines at this stage.[25] David's motivations are made clear in I Sam 27:1; he has fled to Philistia to stay out of Saul's reach. The miniseries contradicts this and David, on television, is heroically motivated to sabotage the Philistines from within, using the knowledge of his conflict with Saul as the cover for his actual devotion to the Israelite king.

David's flight from and then battle with Saul is a key moment in *The Bible: The Epic Miniseries*. Here though, the story is told from Saul's perspective. We see Saul becoming more and more unhinged and see his children register their concerns about his behaviour. Jonathan explains that there is no justice in his persecution of David and so David is clearly not presented as a traitor. Unusually for David films, the sequence from 1 Sam 24 in which David chooses not to kill Saul as he relieves himself in a cave is presented and helps to show David as a just character. When Saul later kills himself in the midst of a battle with the Philistines, the audience takes David as a loyal subject who then becomes king. Since Jonathan perishes here as

well, there is no hint that David has attempted to usurp the throne from a rightful heir.

That David might not be the legitimate ruler of Israel is hinted at in the second part of the 1976

miniseries, which, as has already been mentioned, offers a more morally ambiguous version of

David than the first part, showing him devising elaborate strategies involving deception. In an

unusual sequence right before the Bathsheba bathing incident, David consults with his royal scribes

about the Biblical genealogies that they are writing. The scribes explain that they are compiling

genealogies as arguments to prove that David is the rightful heir to the throne, an interesting nod to

the redaction history of the Bible and unusual acknowledgment for such a film that the Bible is not

necessarily the divine word. Yet this is also an addition to Samuel and such a self-referential

sequence is not present in the Bible.

David's Shifting Masculine Heroism

The character of King David as received in Samuel is not particularly consistent with the

heteronormative models of masculine heroism typically presented in epic cinema.  Here

is a character who begins as a simple shepherd boy and is renowned for his skills as a musician.

Yet he is also a character without qualms about killing or engaging in violence. Making these

character traits fit the expectations of a kingly epic role model is one of the most difficult

challenges for filmmakers and is perhaps one of the clearest ways in which the films have had

difficulties. Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch's observations on the depiction of masculinity in Darren

Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014) are relevant here. Films about David have tended to present the king in

modes of masculinity that are specific to the eras of the films' production while simultaneously

reifying portrayals of women in the Davidic narrative as models for consideration of these differing

masculinities rather than as characters in their own rights.[26]

Richard Walsh has shown that Jesus films are structured as melodramas and this also seems to be the case for Old Testament epics.[27] The characters are not the complex characters of dramatic cinema; they are stock figures of genre filmmaking and the protagonists of these movies experience character arcs like those of the heroes of traditional westerns. So when Victor Mature and Charlton Heston play Samson and Moses with relatively straightforward arcs, their portrayals well suit the expectations of the epic genre. Rather than emulate the complex characterizations of Samuel, filmmakers have tended to create a David that mimics established cinematic or other popular culture heroes.  For example, as Johanna Stiebert, following David Clines, has shown, Gregory Peck's David displays the traits of self-reliance expected in the western or the epic.[28] David's masculinity is exaggerated in *David vs. Goliath: Battle of Faith* (2016) and so  are the stock characters' masculinities (the entire cast performs roles that could as easily be  found  in professional  wrestling  melodramas).  David  in  *David  and  Goliath*  (1960) similarly imitates the heroes of the Hercules/muscleman genre. Given the significant difference in the portrayals of David in these films, it is interesting to note some common themes in his reception across these movies.

*Music and Poetry*

David's skill as a musician is made apparent in 1 Sam 16: 14-23, when his playing of the lyre is able to soothe Saul. There is a larger Biblical tradition of David as a musician, most notably expressed through the superscriptions for many of the Psalms that are typically translated, "of/by David." Thus, for centuries the tradition has been that David  is at least credited with authorship of many of the Psalms (if not being the actual author himself). DeClaissé-Walford, Jacobsen, and

Tanner argue that these superscriptions were not intended to indicate authorship but rather to suggest that they were linked to Davidic ideas more generally. [29] Regardless of the original intent of the superscriptions, the tradition that links David with musicianship has been important in the reception of this figure since antiquity.

The references in these films to David as a musician or poet are not straightforward. This is such a key element of the reception of King David that its absence from the cinematic versions of the king is notable. Fundamentally, it would seem that being a musician or poet is not consistent with what is expected of a masculine hero in historical epics. David Clines has argued that musicianship was seen as a masculine trait in the era of Samuel's authorship and the relationship between masculinity and music since cannot be understood in simple binary terms.[30] There are numerous other genres of Hollywood films, such as westerns, where masculine heroes do sing but this seems atypical of epic cinema. Perhaps writing poetry would not make for good cinema but certainly musical performances have long been part of filmmaking. Most Bible epics do feature a music and dancing sequence; usually this is some kind of orientalist feast in which semi-naked belly dancers perform for the kings while elites recline like Romans at dining tables.

The most complex depiction of David's musicality is in the miniseries *The Story of David* (1976). It opens with a still image of Michelangelo's *David* and then a quick cut to Timothy Bottoms as David, strumming his lyre and singing a melancholic tune. The narrator explains that the miniseries was "filmed in Israel where 3000 years ago Saul was the first king of Israel and David was a shepherd." Here then, the introduction sets the stage for the first part of the miniseries, where we will witness the transformation of David from boyhood innocence to warrior. After he kills Goliath, David still sings but now in a noticeably lower pitch, signifying his newfound manhood. Later, on his wedding night, Michal asks him to play the lyre for her. He responds: "I have forgotten how." Now that he is about to become a man sexually, he can no longer be a musician, the narrative logic seems to suggest. In episode 2, however, David sings again, but now his playing

of music symbolizes his self-indulgence and ambiguous morality. In the first extended sequence of David, we see him lolling about and playing music as his children and wives frolic around him. He seems barely aware of his children whose names and mothers he cannot keep straight. The grown man as musician, in this mini-series, is not a figure of emulation.

Later, in *The Story of David*, the king uses his musical skills to seduce Bathsheba in a calculated fashion. As he strums his lyre, Bathsheba accepts his advances. In this instance, the lyre is his instrument of seduction and symbolic of his immoral appetites. David's musicianship here works as a kind of cinematic shorthand for romantic involvement and this is the case in other films as well. The lyre is also an instrument of seduction in *David and Goliath* (1960). As the shepherd plays for Saul, Michal listens and falls in love with him. It functions more to develop his love interest rather than as an integral part of his personality or as an aspect of his relationship with Saul (which is even more difficult to understand in this film than in 1 Samuel.).

*The Bible: The Epic Miniseries* also first introduces David as a musician; the young David is shown nervously playing his lyre for Saul, who lies clearly ill on his bed. Given the episodic nature of this series, in which its structure allows the narrative to cut between famous Biblical scenes, it is easier to show a youthful, musical David and an older warrior king without needing to show the arc that leads from one to the other. Indeed, the next episode shows David still as a shepherd boy but no longer meek in Saul's presence. Here, though, we have an instance where David is portrayed as a poet. As he walks up to fight Goliath, David recites Psalm 23, but given the tradition of Davidic authorship, this sequence may be read as him composing it as a prayer to the Lord as he goes to meet his probable death. David in Timothy Chey's 2015 *David and Goliath* also recites Psalm 23 out loud as a prayer, as he literally walks through a valley (the Valley of Elah). In both these cases, the musicianship and poetry reflects his youth and establishes the starting point of David's character arc that leads to his development as the masculine hero.

That musicianship was an aspect of David's boyhood that was abandoned once he became king is

also an element of *David and Bathsheba* (1951). As Peck's David struggles with how best to

resolve the crisis that faces him in the form of an angry mob

wanting to punish Bathsheba, his wife takes down his lyre and asks him to play for her from his

boyhood, saying that she has never heard him play. Peck's David strums a simple, melancholy tune

on the lyre and then recites Psalm 23. He explains that he wrote that as a boy, when he discovered

God for himself in the wonders of nature. Repeating those words to himself, the music and the

poetry act as catalyzing forces on David, who gains the resolve necessary to save Bathsheba from

the wrath of the crowd and Israel from the wrath of God. David's musical and poetic skills are

made out to be simple and child-like, but hold a powerful message because of that simplicity.

*Friendship with Jonathan*

Mark S. Smith has shown that one of the transformative moments in the emotional arc of David

comes with the death of his friend Jonathan.[31] This is expressed most poignantly in 2 Sam 1: 26-27.

In Smith's reading of those verses, "the poem's act of commemoration marks a watershed in the

larger representation of David: he has developed from a successful warrior into a military leader

who knows and feels devastating loss for himself and for Israel."[32] Despite the cinematic appeal of

such a moment of growth for a hero, cinematic visions of David have not dwelt on this relationship.

Part of the problem may be the more typical complications of having to make decisions about

simplifying plot and removing characters. Yet perhaps it also speaks to a level of discomfort for

portraying homosocial relationships of Biblical figures on screen outside of a military or action

context. While male friendships are a staple of some genres, they seem to play less of a role in

historical epics. Perhaps the action film allows such displays of affection between

men because the masculinity of the characters is expressed in the rest of the film? The historical

epic has less room for such displays.

James Harding's study of the reception of David and Jonathan's relationship has shown just how complex the readings of this aspect of the Davidic story are. Harding identifies that there is "widespread disagreement among readers and interpreters, without and within the academy, concerning the nature of the relationship between David and Jonathan." [33] He explores how readings of the relationship have been influenced by contemporary ideologies, by the openness of the text, and the history of its reception.[34] In particular, Harding is interested in why readers of the text now ask if David and Jonathan were homosexual lovers and notes that in some circles this is taken as a well-accepted reading and yet does not occur at all to readers in other communities.[35] Harding ably shows that this is a particularly open narrative and subject to much interpretive latitude. Yet, in terms of cinematic exegesis, it is interesting to note how little latitude filmmakers have chosen to take with this element of the David story, especially in relation to other open narratives, such as the seduction of Bathsheba.

Arguably, the relationship between Jonathan and David is most powerfully expressed in *David and Goliath* (1951), even though hardly any screen-time is devoted to the character of the king's friend. We do see Jonathan as a childhood friend in flashback, trying to defend David from Saul's machinations and to help him in the battle against Goliath. Yet what would have been most compelling for the audience in 1951 is the sequence where Gregory Peck roams the hillsides in which he fought a battle. Previously, David had commented that: "I had a friend once but I destroyed him" and so the audience is told that David still feels guilt many years later. In the hillside sequence, the camera

shows us Peck's face while we hear the sounds of battle and we realize that the king is reliving the horrors of battle. Rather than revelling in glory, David is clearly upset by the memory. He calls out for Jonathan and goes to strike, seeming to forget that he is no longer in battle. Once David realizes where he is, he more consciously expresses his feelings about Jonathan and we hear Peck say the

lines of 2 Samuel 1: 26-27, including: "Thy love for me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women."

For an audience who had just gone through World War II, David's conflicted and tortured emotions would resonate greatly. Here David laments his fallen friend and expresses emotions that recent veterans would well have been able to identify with. Grappling with the aftermath of World War II is one of the hallmarks of the Biblical epics of the 1950s and 1960s and while this is perhaps less overt in *David and Bathsheba*, Peck's performance captures the difficulties of the return to domestic life that is typical of the genre. Page notes other elements of the film that reflect the difficulties that veterans must have had in readjusting to civilian life, especially the opening sequences which portray a bored David risking his life rather than being at home with his family.[36] The friendship with Jonathan in *David and Goliath* (1960) is used to emphasize the courtly intrigue of the film and captures another generic element of the Hollywood epic. A typical subplot of ancient epics in the 1950s and 1960s involves evil relatives plotting to gain control of the throne for themselves. In this case, Abner is attempting to seize the throne and Jonathan acts as the foil to this wicked character. Abner even plots against David by convincing Saul to send the shepherd against Goliath and Jonathan risks his life by trying to join the boy in battle. The film ends with Saul killing Abner just as Abner attempts to murder the king from a secret position in the castle. The miniseries *The Story of David* is longer than a feature film and so has more time to spend developing the friendship between the two men. Narratively, the friendship serves, as already noted, to show that David's actions in becoming king were not seditious, which follows 1 Sam 23: 17.[37] He desperately loved the house of Saul and the tearful conversations between David and Jonathan demonstrate that David was not attempting rebellion but was forced to defend himself at the behest of the heir to the throne. Before Saul's final battle with the Philistines, David prays to Yahweh to protect Jonathan and Saul but his prayers are not answered. We see the Philistine soldiers kill the men and then David weeps with grief and rends his robes as he is surrounded by a

puzzled crowd. This functions as the climax for the first part of the miniseries and here the death of the two men is used as a dramatic high point of the narrative, breaking the miniseries up just as the books of Samuel are divided.

Jonathan is also clearly David's friend in *The Bible: The Epic Miniseries* where we are explicitly told that Jonathan loves David like a brother. The friendship here is emphasized as a means of demonstrating Saul's increasing jealousy and paranoia. Jonathan's support of David is not so much out of friendship but reflects his greater concerns that Saul is not fit for kingship. Jonathan's death is a dramatic moment for Saul in this film, not for David. It is Saul who is shown weeping over the body of the dead young man. Unlike in 1 Samuel 31:4 where Saul asks the Amalekite to kill him to avoid being slaughtered by a Philistine, the death of Jonathan in this film leads Saul to grief-induced suicide.

Independent Christian cinema offers different takes on male friendship. David's friendships are an important part of Chey's 2015 *David and Goliath.* The friends are believers in God but they do not share the same fervour as David. So their role in the story is not so much to catalyze a personality change in the young man but to act as foils for his own faith or as sounding boards allowing David to explain the nature of faith. For example, the night before his battle with Goliath, one friend approaches David and asks, "You keep talking about faith to your brothers. What does faith mean?" David answers, "Faith is building an Ark when no one else believes…. Faith in God is the unknown but the known." The man continues, "How can I have this faith in God?" Conversations like this make up much of the film and reflect an evangelical vision of David.

*David vs. Goliath: Battle of Faith* (2016) also presents the importance of male friendships. Here though, his male friends are training buddies and sparring partners. Their friendships are forged through working out and increasing their skills in combat. In this film, which glorifies masculine physical strength, there is no place for an emotional bond outside of athletics. Despite the arguably

homoerotic subtext of half-naked men working out with their oiled bodies on display, in the context of the community this film is intended for, these scenes seem to offer athletics as a socially acceptable location of heteronormative engagement with other male bodies.

Only in Richard Gere's *King David* do we see a hint that the relationship between David and Jonathan may have been sexual. Stiebert describes how the film uses older cinematic idioms to imply sexual relations between the two men when David, after defeating Goliath is comforted by his friend.[38] Later, as David and Michal enter the bridal chamber, Jonathan's expression is one of loss and longing. These hints are subtle, meant to be picked up on by those aware of the interpretative history of the relationship of the two figures but remain unnoticed by most viewers. The relationship between the two men

is never really developed and the director, considering the film after the fact, expressed dissatisfaction with this element of the film.[39]

*The Battle With Goliath*

David's fight with the giant Goliath poses particular problems for filmmakers since it is one of the best known stories about David and yet so difficult to reconcile with an historical-realistic aesthetic. Sometimes this problem is acknowledged, as when Gregory Peck's David explains to Bathsheba that his battle with Goliath has already reached legendary status: "Well, I will admit, he [Goliath] grows a little bit bigger every year." Occasionally productions omit the battle, such as the 1960 British television movie *A Story of David*. However, more often it is a central element since audiences expect to see this fight. *David and Bathsheba* features it in flashback, despite the fact that most of the film takes place after David has become king. In fact, the memory of that battle is turned into a transformative moment for Peck's David; as he remembers battling Goliath (through reciting Psalm 23 to himself) and we see David as a boy looking with horror at the blood upon his

hand, David gains the resolve to stand up to Nathan and the angry mob of Israelites and admit his sinning before God.

The conflict with the Philistine is the centerpiece of *David and Goliath* (1960), which situates the confrontation in the midst of a more typical epic-scope battle. The audience sees masses of chariots, horses, and infantry marching over the hills of Yugoslavia standing in for Israel. Here the story of David and Goliath is shown within the setting of a large-scale battle, a type of stock scene from the historical epics of the era that impresses viewers with its enormity onscreen and convinces them of the historicity

of the reconstruction of the past. The epic-scale battle pauses, however, to allow for the one-on-one combat expected of the narrative. In this film, David's foil is Aldo Pedinotti's Goliath, who made a living off camera as a performing circus giant. He looms enormously on a hill above David, standing with his fellow Philistines illustrating the scale of his size. Their contest becomes more like the contest of demi-gods or wrestlers, for David's heroic athleticism has been established since the first moment he appeared on screen. David is not a young boy standing up to a giant but a body-building hero squaring off against a body-building villain.[40]

The relationship of the hero to violence in *David and Goliath* is that he is both skilled at it but not bloodthirsty. David does not hesitate to finish off Goliath with his sword after knocking him down with his well-placed slingshot. Yet immediately following, he grimaces and looks to the sky, with his hands held in quiet prayer. The two accounts of the battle with Goliath in 1 Samuel are mute on David's reaction, although there is no hint that he found the violence distasteful. Despite the dramatic possibilities of 1 Samuel 17:45-47, in which David yells pronouncements from God against Goliath before the battle, the film does not depict this. David speaks just before he uses the sling, noting the vultures that circle Goliath's head, comments that function to distract the Philistine. There is no cocky bravado as in Samuel.

The battle with the Philistine in *The Story of David* (1976) is intended as an historically realistic

encounter, as evidenced by the use of David Noel Freedman as a consultant. Goliath is established as a large but not giant warrior through perspective shots that make it impossible to judge his actual height. He speaks in a foreign language, described as the dialect of the Sea Peoples; as already noted, the use of a different

language makes this seem like an effort at an historical reconstruction. One of the early scenes of David has established his skill with the sling when he kills a lion while protecting his father's sheep. When he asks Saul to let him fight, he seems like a naïve innocent boy and Saul pats his head condescendingly. When he goes to battle, the sequence is filmed like a typical action sequence; Goliath runs at him and as he does so, David winds up and hits him in the head with the stone, just in the nick of time. There is no speech from David beforehand but after he runs to finish off the Philistine, he exclaims that he has done this for Saul. Here the filmmakers work to establish David's fidelity to his king rather than to Yahweh as is emphasized in Samuel. At the same time, this is presented as David's inauguration into a life of violence. After the commercial break, David now wears a beard and is a soldier who is treated with adulation by the Israelites, who chant his name in heroic glorification.

Goliath's death in the 1985 Richard Gere film is also presented as an historically plausible moment. Goliath here is a large man but not necessarily a giant. The ambiguous perspective of the camera allows the audience to draw its own conclusions on whether or not Goliath would be deemed superhuman. The Philistine is dressed in realistic armour (although not accurate for the era) and brandishes a heavy Egyptian-style sword. As he marches forward, hurling spears at David, the sequence feels like an action film with its swelling music and looming menace. David fires off two stones to no avail, extending the battle. As Goliath walks forward, the music abruptly stops and we see that Goliath has been taken down by David's sling. Here the interruption of the music helps add an element of surprise that would normally be difficult with an audience so familiar with this element of the story.

As with the battle shot in 1960, the 1985 version also features a relatively mute David. He makes no speech to Goliath before the battle. And after knocking him down with the sling stone, he cuts off his opponent's head as in Samuel.  However, here the text is expanded upon to show David's distaste for the violence even more so than in 1960. We see David getting up the nerve to cut off Goliath's head and he finally mutters and then shouts, "So be it Lord" as he brings down the blade. The Downey-Burnett miniseries episode also offers an historically realistic Goliath, not an actual giant but a large and powerful warrior. The sequence is filmed like a typical action sequence. David announces "I will kill him" and Saul tries to give the  boy a shield. David throws it to the ground, saying, "I will be better without it" as he selects the stones he will use in battle. Here is the kind of build-up that one might expect in a western shootout, where the hero is going out to duel with a gunslinger known to be more skilled. As David walks out to meet Goliath, he recites Psalm 23 (as already noted). Initially Goliath refuses to fight and turns his back. David exclaims, "I will fight you", and hurls his stone. Then he rushes to Goliath without hesitation, cuts off his enemy's head, and holds it aloft yelling in triumph. Then, as the Israelite forces rush to battle, David joins in as an expert soldier. A transition sequence shows him fighting in his shepherd's robes, then in a soldier's garb, and then as an older actor in the same armour, while the narrator explains "David joins Saul's army and battles the Philistines for decades and becomes a warrior, a leader, a hero." Here then the battle of Goliath is explicitly used as a pivotal moment for David's character, where his development into a leader and hero is explicitly linked to his development as a soldier.

Perhaps the most original takes on David's battle with Goliath are those of more recent independent Christian cinema. Timothy Chey's 2015 *David and Goliath* departs dramatically from the Biblical narrative and what Chey presents is more of a fantasy version inspired roughly by the story in Samuel. David, played by Miles Sloman, is a young shepherd who is desperate to fight Goliath and constantly frustrated by his fellow Israelites' refusal to engage the giant. The film is structured around David trying to convince his companions to let him fight and often they tell him

explicitly that his faith in God will not be enough (but of course the viewer knows that it will be).

Perhaps the intention here is to provide a story for young male evangelical Americans to be

steadfast in their own faith when surrounded by those who do not believe with the same intensity.

The Philistines wear odd dark robes and eyeliner, looking something like twenty-first- century

goths; the maniacal poses and fervour for Dagon make them easily read as Satanic by the intended

audience.  Goliath here is like a fusion of a monster and wrestler. He roams about, repeating in a

bellowing demonic voice, "You coward. You little maggot. You little weasel. I am God. You are

nothing."  While not directly stated,  Goliath represents the devil for the intended audience.

David's stance against Goliath  here is not just the story of an underdog standing up to Satan; it

represents how an Evangelical man should not be afraid to stake a public claim of faith and not be

afraid  that his faith may separate him from the larger community. David says as much to his

friends in the film by telling them to stand with him against Goliath when asked how they can have

his faith.[41]  After the defeat of Goliath, his friends all stand in a line and congratulate him by

asserting that they now have faith as well.

*David vs. Goliath: Battle of Faith* (2016), as has been mentioned, tells a story of David's training

by the warrior(!) Samuel for battle against Goliath. The battle with Goliath is a long hand-to-hand

combat sequence where David uses a sword made of meteoric iron given to him by Saul to fight

the Philistine. The two men are buff warriors and the scene owes more to gladiator spectacles,

wrestling, and mixed martial arts than the book of Samuel. At the end of the battle, the film offers

some slight reference to the original story. When David is near defeat, he is rejuvenated by

thinking of Michal and crafts a sling with which he is finally able to kill his opponent.

Perhaps an added complexity to cinematic receptions of the David and Goliath conflict is how

prominent this relationship is in popular culture. This is one of the most common stories in Biblical

receptions aimed at children and various filmed versions are available for children, each presenting

as many complexities in interpreting the text as described in these films. A cartoon retelling in the

series *Max, the 2000 Year-Old Mouse*, offers a strictly historical reading of the fight, alongside of

episodes dealing with other legendary-historical figures, like Daniel Boone or Hannibal. In

contrast, the Claymation children's series *Davey and Goliath* (from the makers of *Gumby*), about a

boy and his dog, clearly reference the names of the characters but offer little in the way of

reception of the slingshot story, other than perhaps that each episode requires the characters to have

faith in God. These are just two examples, but the sheer volume and variety of popular culture

versions of David and Goliath, offered to audiences from childhood on, cannot help but create a

foundation of some confusion regarding the original text.

David the Adulterer

Perhaps just as important for receptions of the Davidic narratives are treatments of the seduction of

Bathsheba. Nathan's rebuke of David (2 Sam 11:27-12:25) gives us a textual evaluation of David's

misdeed. In Nathan's juridical parable, it is not adultery that David is accused of but a property

crime against Uriah.[42] Of course the implications that wives are property would not sit well with

21st-century audiences. In later receptions of the story, though, a romantic element is introduced

into the incident that, Exum has argued, is not present textually. [43] The author of Samuel does not

indicate that David wants Bathsheba for a wife (in fact, the king would prefer that Uriah assume

paternity of the unborn child) and makes no reference to Bathsheba's feelings about the situation.

For film, the incident is recast as a romantic one.

Text aside, in the reception of the story, David's moral failings have usually been understood as

adulterous rather than rooted in property crimes or sexual aggression. The king engages in

voyeurism, by watching her bathe without her knowledge. [44] David commits adultery with her, and

he commits what is tantamount to murder by sending her husband Uriah, a faithful member of

David's military, to his death. In cinematic contexts these failings are often smoothed over,

apologized for, and justified. That cinema would have difficulties with this is not surprising since there are many extra-biblical traditions surrounding David that attempt to apologize or justify his actions as presented in this text. Further problematic, the Hollywood Production Code (Hays Code) prevented screenwriters from presenting adultery as an attractive option for viewers, so David and Bathsheba's relationship needed to be treated carefully in older cinema.[45]

Within the limits set out by the production code, adultery was a common topic of Hollywood epic cinema. Forshey has shown that one of the dominant story arcs of ancient epics is to show how the state can be endangered when great men cannot control their sexual impulses and so the Davidic story should provide a perfect foundation.[46] An important element of this, though, is that women are the dangerous element in these films and so, in some ways, David must be presented as an unwitting victim, not as the agent of his own immorality.

Cinematic presentations in particular pick up on the extra-biblical interpretation of Bathsheba as a knowing participant in the affair if not the individual who orchestrated it.[47] In fact, at times she is taken as the seducer not the seduced. As presented in 2 Sam 11, Bathsheba has no agency in the seduction event. She seems, in McCarter's terms, "completely passive"; she has not orchestrated the seduction and the text does not tell us if she was aware of the king watching her bathe. [48] If anything, the text is hardly interested in her at all at this point in the story.[49] It is David's relationship with Uriah that is central and here the morality of these two characters' actions is what is juxtaposed.[50] Yet numerous interpreters have attempted to read Bathsheba as an immoral figure with significant agency in this episode.[51] Part of this approach to characterization may come from intra-Biblical interpretation in which Bathsheba's later actions in support of her son Solomon are read in relation to her first meetings with David. More importantly for this study, however, has been the problematic view of David offered in Samuel and more general trends in the history of interpretation of female biblical characters. As Sara Koenig has explained: "Bathsheba in particular threatens a specific theological picture of

David as the supreme human ruler of Israel…it has, in some cases, been important to devalue Bathsheba in order to maintain a high view of David."[52]

Based on this reception history, Bathsheba can be portrayed with the characteristics of one of the most prominent stock female characters in Biblical epic: the scheming seductress or vamp. Building on orientalist stereotypes of sexually aggressive women who use their bodies to manipulate men for power, the seductress allowed Biblical and ancient epics to be more provocative but since this character was usually cast as a villain, that provocativeness could be taken as a moralizing portrayal (of how not to behave). Claudette Colbert's performance as Empress Poppaea in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) well embodies this kind of character, a performance that was instrumental in convincing Hollywood studios to voluntarily enforce the Hays Code. Characters such as Poppaea are a frequent feature of the ancient epic film, and so this is an easy way for scriptwriters to expand Bathsheba's character from the laconic mentions in the Davidic narrative in a manner that is consistent with cinematic genre expectations.

*David and Bathsheba (1951)*

The seductive version of Bathsheba is most clearly presented in *David and Bathsheba* (1951). Given the title of the film, it should be expected that the scriptwriter would need to fill out her character beyond that presented in 2 Samuel. Babington and Evans have shown that Susan Hayward's portrayal was explicitly intended to demonstrate that she was not a passive victim of David's voyeurism and sexual appetites but a conscious manipulator of the king.[53] Hayward's Bathsheba explains to Peck's David, in their first meeting that she had purposefully displayed herself to him, knowing that "never had the

king found a woman to please him." As the affair begins, she says to him "if the law of Moses is to

be broken, let us break it with full understanding of what we want from one another." Dunne, the screenwriter, may have been an agnostic but he saw conversion arcs as a method of structuring Biblical film.[54] The rest of the film shows David's struggle to redeem himself based on his sinful activities and his arc is one that parallels the faith journey expected of an American Christian, from the recognition of one's own sinfulness and in that acknowledgement, being forgiven by God. That being said, David's sinfulness is still softened in Peck's portrayal. The film establishes that his marriage to Michal is merely a political match, not a love match. In a conversation between the two, their past love for one another is acknowledged but, as David notes, she refused to follow him into exile and married someone else. Peck's David argues: "We're past the days of our passion…. love, or hatred, or anguish, or even cruelty. Why should we torture ourselves? We have to go on living, Michal." His adultery, then, does not constitute an emotional betrayal of Saul's daughter, although she responds to his affair with anger. Stiebert sees here an argument that David was: "driven into the arms of another woman by the barbs and nagging of Michal, a disloyal wife."[55] Exum makes the interesting argument that this cinematic interpretation of Michal makes her a more memorable character than in Samuel but in so doing, viewers will not likely sympathize with her. [56] Michal's contempt for David, in this film, is not due to his physical display in front of the Ark (the only explanation given in Samuel) but is due to romantic frustration.[57]

Other dialogue further softens David's polygamy for the 1951 audience. In his seduction of Bathsheba, Peck's David explains that Egyptian kings have different rights over their female subjects but that even if he had those rights, he would not take advantage of them. Thus, without explicitly stating that David does not have a harem, a point is made that his is not the harem of typical orientalist fantasy. Dunne did not like the way that DeMille used Biblical topics as a means to allow him to show "sex and sadism" onscreen and Dunne told his producer Darryl Zanuck, who had commissioned the script, that he would write "a mature love story and nothing more."[58]

Uriah is also vilified and made into less of a loyal servant of the king and more of a neglectful husband.[59] The usual explanation for Uriah's refusal to have sexual relations is offered, that he has vowed to abstain before battle. Yet the story is further expanded to show that Uriah thinks little of Bathsheba. The marriage was arranged and the two have only spent six days with one another. As Babington and Evans have demonstrated, David's angered explanation to Uriah that "[a] woman's occupation is her husband. Her life is his love," is obviously problematic to 21st century viewers but reflects an effort in 1951 to portray David as sensitive to the needs of women.[60] So while Uriah's character is called into question, David's is refurbished.

David's complicity in the death of Uriah is complex in this film, even though it is softened from the book of Samuel. Upon learning that Bathsheba is pregnant, Peck's David subtly asks Uriah what he would do if the Hittite discovered that his wife had committed adultery. Uriah's answer is clear; if that were to be the case, Bathsheba should be punished according to the law and it would be his responsibility, as her husband, to make sure that the law is upheld. Thus, if David does not take action, his love will be put to death by an angry crowd (and the audience has just seen another adulterer put to death in a previous scene). Uriah unwittingly offers the solution himself. In his desperate quest

for glory on the battlefield, he implores David to send him into the most dangerous combat zones. This becomes David's moral struggle, as he must decide whether or not to honour this request. Eventually he does so, and, stating aloud that Uriah's commander Joab must not be tainted by the king's hypocrisy, adds to the order that Joab is to remove himself from the front when Uriah goes forward. This is an interesting twist in the story of David, for the king's sin has been reframed from adultery to that of immoral actions as a military commander.[61] Dunne intended political power, not romantic conflict, to be the basis for the conflict in the movie. [62] Likely this kind of moral struggle would have resonated with the 1951 audience, who would have had their own experiences with making or being impacted by such command decisions during the Second World

War.

As David's guilt grows, he retreats from life – from his wife and from his duties, mirroring perhaps the problems that many returning soldiers faced in returning to civilian life. His hair grows long and his beard reflects his growing emotional distance from the world around him. Scared, he looks to flee from society rather than confront his problems (manifest as Nathan and the Israelite mob). It is Bathsheba who sets him on the path to redemption. By standing by him and recognizing her own complicity in Uriah's death, she helps give him the strength to make the right choice. It is not her that enters the public square to face off against her accusers; but, in keeping with a 1950s ethos, she gives her husband the strength to go out and face the world while she remains at home. Bathsheba learns to provide the moral foundation for his actions in public life.

Peck's David is fully redeemed at the end of *David and Bathsheba* through his direct personal engagement with God. He kneels before the Ark of the Covenant and prays to God, acknowledging that he is a sinner and asking God not to punish Israel for her king's crimes. After Peck's David finishes praying, it starts to rain, ambiguously indicating that God has forgiven all and has brought the drought He enacted upon the land to an end. Here then is a Christian reading of the David story. By heroically and humbly acknowledging that he is a sinner, David opens up the possibility for redemption through God, a message that the audience would have recognized from their own experiences with church. For screenwriter Dunne, who was not religious himself, it was really David's development of political humility that was the more important arc, but the Christian messaging is readily apparent in the final form of the film.

David's stand against Nathan beforehand, in which the king tells the prophet that he wants to speak directly to God, and not just trust the interpretation of Nathan further suggests a Protestant reading of the Davidic narrative, in which the individual relationship to God is privileged over traditional authority figures. Page has noted that elsewhere in the film, a Christian prioritization over Jewish tradition is apparent, especially in David's seeming disgust at the enactment of strictly legalistic

readings of the Bible.[63] Peck's David finds fault with the fact that a soldier who touched the Ark was killed for that act and suggests that might have been due to other causes, that it was an unreasonable punishment from God.[64] Indeed, that Uriah should hold so strictly to laws regarding adultery points to a narrative perspective in which strict adherence to Biblical law is problematic. Given Dunne's own lack of religious faith, the protestant prioritizing should not be taken as intentional; rather, at least from the perspective of the writer, the intention was to critique authority based on strict legal but not moral grounds.

*King David (1985)*

After the Hollywood Production Code was no longer in effect, David's adultery remained problematic and even Richard Gere's David cannot stomach infidelity. On the day of David's coronation, Michal rejects him, stating that she is only a political symbol of the union between his house and the house of Saul. She implores him to let her return to the man she loves whom she considers her real husband, Palti, son of Laish.[65] David tells her that he has never loved another woman as he once loved her, although his multiple wives are acknowledged. As Exum notes, the irony of this reinterpretation is that Michal is made guilty of adultery but David will not be in this movie.[66] The filmmakers have been inspired by 2 Sam 6:20-23, in which Michal expresses her contempt for the new king after she saw him dance and strum his instrument, semi-nude before the Ark. Michal articulates her derision in the film, stating before she is interrupted, "I saw no king. I saw only a dancing man flaunting his nakedness in the sight of every common whore…" The scene of David viewing Bathsheba bathing immediately follows Michal's rejection and so the king is now, at least narratively, to be excused for lusting after her.

As with the other films, *King David* builds on the extra-Biblical tradition that Bathsheba was cognizant that David was watching her bathe and, as Stiebert illustrates, is the one with agency in initiating the relationship.[67] Uriah is also to blame for Bathsheba's pursuit of other men and so

David's actions are not those of a greedy lustful king but a romantic hero. She explains to David in their first conversation, "He scorns to lie with me. He refuses even to touch me except with a whip." David answers, "He shall be punished." Bathsheba explains to him, "A women has no redress against her husband my Lord." She can endure the pain, she states, but wishes she could have a child. David tells her that she

shall have a child but she is emphatic; "Not while my husband lives." She refuses to commit adultery even in a loveless marriage. When we see Uriah on camera, he is a cold, unappealing, and abusive character; there is no effort to present him as a loyal subject of David. As Exum explains: "Perhaps for the cinematic versions, the duping and murder of a good man was unthinkable. Uriah, like Bathsheba, must be guilty so that David's betrayal of him is not totally deserved."[68]

While the editing is ambiguous, the implication is that Gere's David does not have sexual relations with Bathsheba until after the death of Uriah. Exum points out that the lack of sexual contact means that the consequences of the relationship that befall David make little narrative sense. [69]

That such a break from textual tradition is still necessary when the film has cast the star of *American Gigolo* speaks to the difficulties of this aspect of the David story for American filmmakers. It is not that the filmmakers are reluctant to depict sexuality. The film does not shy away from nudity; Michal is shown topless in bed with David and Bathsheba is shown fully nude to the camera while another woman rubs her with oil.[70] While the actual sex scenes are not graphic, it is clear that it was not concerns about offending religious or family audiences that led to these story changes. This was a concern about the ramifications for David's character. The Bathsheba incident has been reimagined as one in which David has done no wrong.

*The Bathsheba Incident on Television*

Miniseries takes on David have had greater interest in showing David's faults. Episode 2 of *The Story of David* (1976) shows David lounging about with his family, unable to keep straight the names of his children or their mothers. By the time we reach the bathing sequence, the audience is ready to accept David as a character who has become corrupted by his own desires. As he watches Bathsheba (Jane Seymour) bathe, the camera vacillates between his increasingly lustful gaze and her body. It is clear that Bathsheba is utterly unaware that she is being watched. Immediately after, we are shown a scene of David tossing in his bed, sweating and distressed, unable to sleep because of his desire for Bathsheba. When she is brought before him, she is nervous and deferent. David is the active seducer, playing music for her as his seduction technique. She submits to him as he plays her music and from this point on becomes a willing participant in the affair.

Immediately following, we see the two of them together, her lying on a couch expressing jealousy about his other wives. The reason for her jealousy becomes apparent as she informs him that she is with child and David responds with joy, exclaiming that he is a "mighty ram" and that she should rejoice because she "bears the seed of David." It is she who convinces David that something must be done about the charge of adultery. David is not concerned for himself but Bathsheba argues that she will be in danger from such an accusation. While David still comes up with the solution of how to deal with Uriah, Bathsheba is shown to be complicit in encouraging him to take action. Uriah's choice to not bed his wife is described by Bathsheba with outrage: "That fool is camping outside in the courtyard with his troops. I am lying on my bed naked, anointed with oil of myrrh and he is sleeping on the stones with fifty soldiers with sweaty feet." In his discussion with Uriah, the faithful soldier explains that he must follow Yahweh's law, keeping with the book of Samuel. David gets him drunk, following the tradition of the text, but here the film adds a scene where Uriah knocks on his wife's door demanding entrance. Yet as he realizes what he is doing, Uriah stops knocking and begs Yahweh for

forgiveness. The filmmakers show David and Bathsheba growing increasingly frustrated and increasingly more immoral in juxtaposition with the faithfulness of Uriah. When Uriah is killed, we see that Bathsheba's mourning is feigned. Since, as already noted, episode 2 of this series presents David as a morally ambiguous figure, his unethical actions are emphasized and expanded upon rather than smoothed over.

A similar treatment of David is apparent in *The Bible: The Epic Miniseries.* There David is caught lusting after Bathsheba by Nathan, who sees him watching Bathsheba bathe. From this David is established as the agent of the seduction and when he summons her to see him, she is clearly depicted as cajoled into the relationship. Uriah is likewise not shown as a neglectful husband; he is the loyal soldier of the book of Samuel. David's immorality is not smoothed over in this segment of the series; it is emphasized as the key event of his kingship.

Conclusions

Forcing the Bible into the constraints of other genres can be difficult. ABC's 2016 *Of Kings and Prophets* attempted to reimagine the story of Saul and David in a televised series following the aesthetic lead of *Game of Thrones*.[71] In this series, very good-looking actors compete with one another for the throne of Israel, through behaviour that is intended to be understood as morally problematic and complex. The show was cancelled without ever airing all of the filmed episodes. Part of the problem may have been that the show was just not very interesting, as Maureen Ryan argued in *Variety*.[72] The network setting did not allow for the violence and sexuality that is typical of *Game of Thrones.*

Yet conservative Christian audiences also complained about such sex and violence filmed in

reference to Biblical characters at the same time that great liberties were taken with the books of Samuel. The *Parents Television Council* (PTC), which had denounced the show before it was aired, took credit for its cancelation, and complained that a network should make a Biblical television series suitable for all audiences.[73] While it is not clear that such complaints directly impacted the decision to cancel the series (Ryan noted that changes in the executive leadership of ABC may have been more responsible), the failure of *Of Kings and Prophets* illustrates the complexities of cinematic presentations of David.[74]

The fundamental problems that may lie at the heart of these big screen reimaginings of King David are how much "otherness" should be prescribed to him and how much audiences expect their heroes to reflect the values of the audience. Perhaps the screen moment that best encapsulates the difficulties in rendering the textual treatment of the character of David accurately is the infamous scene in *King David* (1985) in which Richard Gere dances half naked before the Ark of the Covenant. This is in keeping with 2 Sam 6:14-15, in which the Ark is brought to Jerusalem. David is clad only in an ephod, essentially a loincloth worn by children.[75] Michal watches him singing and playing musical instruments and feels contempt for him. The audience of this film feels the same way as Michal as we watch Richard Gere gyrate in a procession up the hill. Interestingly he does not play any kind of musical instrument, so the film deviates from the Biblical verse, further separating David from his musicianship. Yet even with this deviation, the scene of the king behaving in such a fashion is too jarring for the viewer.

Does David's treatment in film mirror his treatment in other forms of Biblical reception? No simple yes or no is possible as the diversity of receptions is too great for generalization. Certainly, he has been invoked to stand for characteristics that seem at odds with his portrayal in Samuel, such as being included among the Nine Worthies in Medieval times as an exemplar of chivalric values. Compare this with Leonard Cohen's references to David in his song *Hallelujah,* which emphasize his reaction to seeing Bathsheba bathe and the emotional complexities of relationships. What

perhaps makes these film versions of David markedly different from receptions of the king in other media is the seeming realism of film and the convincing nature of cinematic diegesis. As has been noted, most of the filmmakers discussed here made some appeal to either historical-critical or theological accuracy. Seeing embodied versions of narrative, especially those in which historical-seeming props, costumes, and locations are used, make particularly convincing arguments. Contemporary values are normalized in this fashion, demonstrated as typological, through the presentation of their past precedents. This is not all that different from other kinds of historical film-making but it reflects a particular approach to literary criticism that has long been invoked for the Bible.

Such reimagining of ancient heroic characters in line with audience expectations in film is not unique to David. Achilles suffers from similar treatment. Brad Pitt's performance as Achilles in *Troy* renders the demi-god as a stalwart, stoic warrior, not the pouting, tempestuous, and unpredictable figure of *The Iliad*. Yet what is striking about these re-readings of ancient characters is that audiences have not responded well to them. The most successful of the David films discussed here is the Gregory Peck film which was the highest grossing film of 1951, in which David is portrayed as a complex and

tortured character in ways that will have been recognizable to veterans in 1951. Yet even this film has not had a lasting impact on audiences in the way that, for example, the DeMille and Wyler epics have. Rather than presuming audiences will not want to see more complex characterizations of ancient characters, filmmakers should consider that much of the reason for the success of such literature over the past thousands of years has been its richness.

Perhaps this problem of over simplistic popular receptions of ancient literature is one that is reified by contemporary popular culture genres. Sara Koenig offers an argument about the gaps in the text devoted to Bathsheba that is more broadly applicable to Biblical cinema: "Popular accounts in movies, historic artwork, and even children's Bible stories… have filled in the gaps in information

to such an extent that it is difficult for us to let go of our preconceptions and recognize what the text actually tells us and what it does not say."[76] As audience experiences with ancient literature are increasingly mediated by cinematic representations, the expectations for how characters should behave in film and what kinds of events can happen in film minimize the experience of ancient otherness that reading ancient literature can provide. Viewers who only experience the story of David through film are unaware of the literary complexity of these ancient stories.

-----

[1] For more on David in the silent film era, see: Matthew Page. "There Might Be Giants: King David on the Big (and Small) Screen." In *The Bible in Motion: A Handbook of the Bible and its Reception in Film Part 1*. Edited by Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 101-104; and David J. Shepherd, *The Bible on Silent Film: Spectacle, Story, and Scripture in the Early Cinema.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

[2] For an overview of the history of literary scholarship on David, see John Van Seters, *The Biblical Saga of David* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 1-52.

[3] Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001) e as Transformed through the Lens of the Cinematic Epic," *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* 4/1 (2017): 91-123.

[5] Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 4-6.

[6] For an introduction to the debate about the historicity of the United Monarchy, see Walter Dietrich, *The Early Monarchy in Israel: The Tenth Century B.C.E.*, translated by Joachim Vette, Biblical Encyclopedia 3 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007). For an introduction to the archaeological elements of the debate, see Israel Finkelstein, Amihai Mazar, and Brian Schmidt (ed.), *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Israel*, Archaeology and Biblical Studies 17 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

[7] McGeough, *Celluloid Esther*, 60.

[8] David Eldridge, *Hollywood's History Films.* Cinema and Society Series (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2006) 196-197.

[9] Philip Dunne, *Take Two: A Life in Movies and Politics* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1992), 250-251.

[10] Dunne, *Take Two*, 250-251.

[11] Dunne, *Take Two*, 241.

[12] Jon Solomon. *The Ancient World in the Cinema,* revised and expanded edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 170.

[13] Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 4.

[14] http://www.christianpost.com/news/cp-exclusive-david-and-goliath-director-assures-big-budget-

movie-

will-be-biblically-correct-in-every-way-118614/, accessed on September 17, 2017.

[15] http://www.dove.org/review/11567-david-and-goliath/#, accessed on September 17, 2017.

[16] See, for example, Babington and Evans, *Biblical Epics*, 11-12; Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 6; Adele Reinhartz, *Bible and Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 97.

[17] Hans Frei, The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 2-3.

[18] See for example a special issue of *Relegere* devoted to this topic with articles by Jonathan Downing, myself and others: Jonathan Downing, "Introduction: 'Pre-critical' Readers and Readings: The Bible in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 5, no. 1 (2015): 1-5; Kevin M. McGeough, "Pyramid Codes, Playacting, and Veiled Israelite Histories: Pre-Critical Biblical Interpretation and Victorian Archaeology," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 5, no. 1 (2015): 7- 30.

[19] Richard Walsh, Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film (New York: Trinity Press International, 2003), 12

[20]

Richard Francaviglia, "Crusaders and Saracens: The Persistence of Orientalism in Historically Themed Motion Pictures About the Middle East." In *Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film.* Edited by Richard Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky. (Arlington, TX: Texas A & M

University Press, 2007); 57.

[21] Dunne, *Take Two*, 253.

[22] http://www.christianpost.com/news/cp-exclusive-david-and-goliath-director-assures-big-budget-movie-

will-be-biblically-correct-in-every-way-118614/, accessed on September 17, 2017.

[23] Dunne, *Take Two*, 251.

[24] Erin Runions, "The Temptation of Noah: The Debate about Patriarchal Violence in Darren Aronofsky's Noah," In *The Bible in Motion: A Handbook of the Bible and its Reception in Film Part 2*. Edited by Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 832.

[25] P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *I Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* The Anchor Bible 8 (New York: Doubleday, 1980) 416.

[26] See Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch, "'Real' Women and Multiple Masculinities in Aronofsky's *Noah."* In *Noah as Antihero: Darren Aronofsky's Cinematic Deluge*. Edited by Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch and Jon Morgan (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 162-163.
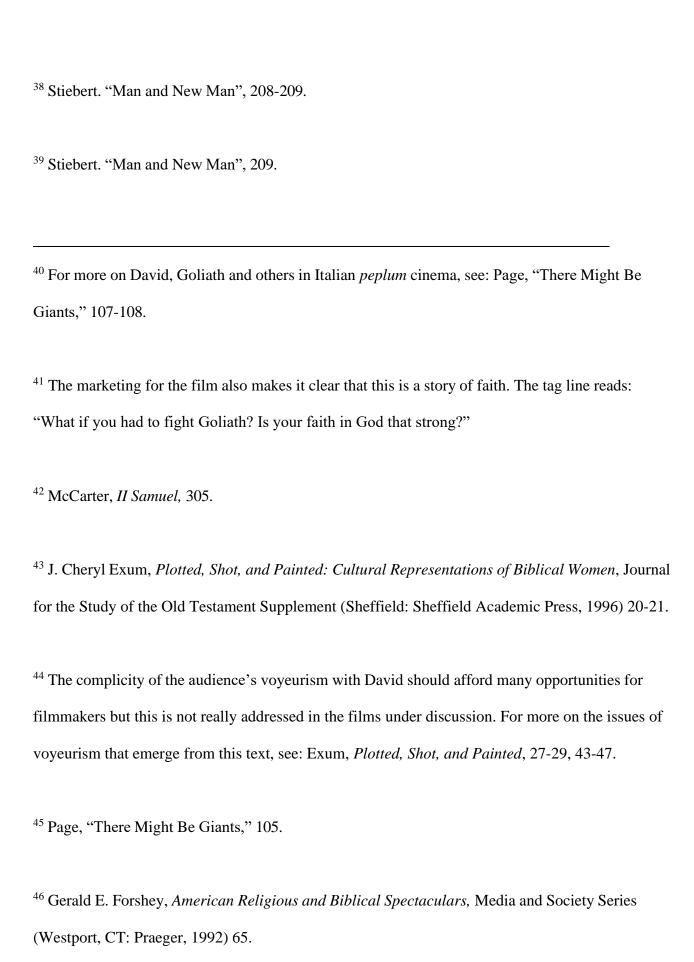
[27] Walsh, *Reading the Gospels*, 21-22.

[28] Johanna Stiebert. "Man and New Man: David's Masculinity in Film," *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* 2/2 (2015), 203, 205-207.

[29] Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobsen and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms,* The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 10.

[30] David J. A. Clines. "David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible," in *The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible.* Edited by David J.A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009 [1995]) 227-228.

[31] Mark S. Smith, *Poetic Heroes: Literary Commemorations of Warriors and Warrior Culture in the Early Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014) 64-67.

[32] Smith, *Poetic Heroes,* 282.

[33] James E. Harding. *The Love of David and Jonathan: Ideology, Text, Reception* (Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2013) 51.

[34] This is the argument of the entire work, but for a brief statement on these three elements, see Harding,

*Love of David and Jonathan*, 32.

[35] Harding, *Love of David and Jonathan*, 14.

[36] Page, "There Might Be Giants," 104.

[37] For more on this verse, see McCarter, *I Samuel,* 375.

38 Stiebert. "Man and New Man", 208-209.

39 Stiebert. "Man and New Man", 209.

---

40 For more on David, Goliath and others in Italian *peplum* cinema, see: Page, "There Might Be Giants," 107-108.

41 The marketing for the film also makes it clear that this is a story of faith. The tag line reads: "What if you had to fight Goliath? Is your faith in God that strong?"

42 McCarter, *II Samuel,* 305.

43 J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 20-21.

44 The complicity of the audience's voyeurism with David should afford many opportunities for filmmakers but this is not really addressed in the films under discussion. For more on the issues of voyeurism that emerge from this text, see: Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 27-29, 43-47.

45 Page, "There Might Be Giants," 105.

46 Gerald E. Forshey, *American Religious and Biblical Spectaculars,* Media and Society Series (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992) 65.

[47] For more, see Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 23-25.

[48] P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* The Anchor Bible 9 (New York: Doubleday, 1984) 288.

[49] Berlin argues that in this part of the story Bathsheba really just functions as a plot device and so we learn little of her character. Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1983) 25-27. Koenig disputes this somewhat, arguing that the story of Bathsheba represents a "gapped" text, where the lack of information given in the text facilitates divergent readings.
Sara M. Koenig, *Isn't This Bathsheba?: A Study in Characterization,* Princeton Theological Monograph Series 177 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011) 10.

[50] Van Seters, *Biblical Saga,* 297.

[51] For more on this, see: Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted,* 22-23; and Koenig, *Isn't This Bathsheba?,* 2, 8- 11.

[52] Koenig, *Isn't This Bathsheba?,* 5.

[53] Babington and Evans, *Biblical Epics*, 85.

[54] For his comments on this related to *The Robe* and *Demetrius and the Galdiators,* see Dunne, *Take Two*, 255.

[55] Stiebert, "Man and New Man", 205.

[56] Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 56.

[57] Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 62.

[58] Dunne, *Take Two*, 249- 250.

[59] Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 48.

[60] Babington and Evans, *Biblical Epics*, 88.

---

[61] For more on other ways that this film softens the moral problems with David's treatment of Uriah, see Stiebert, "Man and New Man", 206-207.

[62] Dunne, *Take Two*, 253.

[63] Page, "There Might Be Giants,"106.

[64] Dunne introduces the idea that this was not God's actions but an unfortunate coincidence thus leaving it up to the audience's interpretation. Dunne, *Take Two*, 251-252.

[65] According to 1 Sam 25: 44, while David was in hiding, Saul had remarried Milcah to Palti son of Laish. In 2 Sam 3:12, David negotiated her return to him. The Bible is mute on Milcah's feelings about her separation from Palti, but McCarter suggests that Palti's expression of loss may imply that she was also sad to go back to David. McCarter, *II Samuel*, 187-188.

[66] Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 66.

[67] Stiebert, "Man and New Man", 210-211.

[68] Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 48.

[69] Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 24.

[70] For more on the homoeroticism implicit in the scene, see: Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 47.

[71] Numerous reviewers noted the obvious attempts to imitate *Game of Thrones.* See for example: Brian Moylan, "Of Kings and Prophets: Where the Bible Meets Game of Thrones," *The Guardian,* March 8, 2016*;* Maureen Ryan, "TV Review: 'Of Kings and Prophets.'"*Variety* March 6, 2016.

[72] Ryan, "TV Review."

[73] Trevor Kimball, "*Of Kings and Prophets:* PTC Celebrates ABC TV Show Cancellation," *TV Series Finale*, March 22, 2016.

[74] Ryan, "TV Review."

[75] McCarter, *II Samuel*, 171.

[76] Koenig, *Isn't This Bathsheba?,* 10.

**References**

Babington, Bruce, and Peter William Evans. *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993.

Berlin, Adele. *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative.* Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1983.

Burnette-Bletsch, Rhonda. "'Real' Women and Multiple Masculinities in Aronofsky's *Noah."* In *Noah as Antihero: Darren Aronofsky's Cinematic Deluge.* Edited by Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch and Jon Morgan.
New York: Taylor & Francis, 2017.

Clines, David J. A.. "David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible." In *The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible.* Edited by David J.A. Clines. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009 [1995].

DeClaissé-Walford, Nancy, Rolf A. Jacobsen and Beth LaNeel Tanner. *The Book of Psalms,* The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014.

Dietrich, Walter. *The Early Monarchy in Israel: The Tenth Century B.C.E.*, translated by Joachim Vette, Biblical Encyclopedia 3. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007.

Downing, Jonathan. "Introduction: 'Pre-critical' Readers and Readings: The Bible in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 5, no. 1 (2015): 1-5.

Dunne, Philip. *Take Two: A Life in Movies and Politics.* New York: Limelight Editions, 1992.
Eldridge, David. *Hollywood's History Films.* Cinema and Society Series. New York: I.B. Taurus, 2006. Elley, Derek. *The Epic Film: Myth and History.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984.
Exum, J. Cheryl. *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996.

Finkelstein, Israel, Amihai Mazar, and Brian Schmidt (ed.). *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Israel*, Archaeology and Biblical Studies 17. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007.

Forshey, Gerald E. *American Religious and Biblical Spectaculars,* Media and Society Series. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992.

Francaviglia, Richard. "Crusaders and Saracens: The Persistence of Orientalism in Historically Themed Motion Pictures About the Middle East." In *Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film.* Edited by Richard Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky. Arlington, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 2007

Frei, Hans. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century*

*Hermeneutics.*

New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974.


Halpern, Baruch. *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King.* Grand Rapids, MI:

Eerdmans, 2001.


Kimball, Trevor. "*Of Kings and Prophets:* PTC Celebrates ABC TV Show Cancellation," *TV Series*

*Finale*, March 22, 2016.


Koenig, Sara M. *Isn't This Bathsheba?: A Study in Characterization,* Princeton Theological

Monograph Series 177. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011.


McCarter, Jr., P. Kyle. *I Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* The

Anchor Bible

8. New York: Doubleday, 1980.


McCarter, Jr., P. Kyle. *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* The

Anchor Bible 9. New York: Doubleday, 1984.


McGeough, Kevin M. "Pyramid Codes, Playacting, and Veiled Israelite Histories: Pre-Critical

Biblical Interpretation and Victorian Archaeology," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 5,

no. 1 (2015): 7- 30.

McGeough, Kevin M. "Celluloid Esther: The Literary Carnivalesque as Transformed through the Lens of the Cinematic Epic," *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* 4/1 (2017): 91-123.

Moylan, Brian. "Of Kings and Prophets: Where the Bible Meets Game of Thrones," *The Guardian,* March 8, 2016.

Page, Matthew. "There Might Be Giants: King David on the Big (and Small) Screen." In *The Bible in Motion: A Handbook of the Bible and its Reception in Film Part 1*. Edited by Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch. Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015.

Reinhartz Adele. *Jesus of Hollywood.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Reinhartz, Adele. *Bible and Cinema: An Introduction.* New York: Routledge, 2013.

Runions, Erin. "The Temptation of Noah: The Debate about Patriarchal Violence in Darren Aronofsky's Noah." In *The Bible in Motion: A Handbook of the Bible and its Reception in Film Part 2*. Edited by Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch. Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015.

Ryan, Maureen. "TV Review: 'Of Kings and Prophets.'"*Variety* March 6, 2016

Shepherd, David J. *The Bible on Silent Film: Spectacle, Story, and Scripture in the Early Cinema.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Smith, Mark S., *Poetic Heroes: Literary Commemorations of Warriors and Warrior Culture in the Early Biblical World.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014.

Solomon, Jon. *The Ancient World in the Cinema,* revised and expanded edition. New Haven: Yale

University Press, 2001.

Stiebert, Johanna. "Man and New Man: David's Masculinity in Film," *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* 2/2 (2015): 197-218.

Van Seters, John. *The Biblical Saga of David*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009.

Walsh, Richard. *Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film* New York: Trinity Press International, 2003.