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A Hebrew *mafioso*: reading 1 Samuel 25 anthropologically

1 Samuel 22:1-2 informs us that David, while escaping from King Saul, finds a cave to hide in Adullam and remains in this place—we can imagine—finding a way out in order to survive. David's brothers and the rest of his father's house arrive and join him. Also, some outlaws and fugitives join the group, making in all some four hundred men under David's command. The story tells us that David and his men flee to the desert of Judah and remain there as a band of outlaws.[1]

Later in the narrative, in 1 Samuel 25, we find the tale of a rich and ugly man named Nabal who owns thousands of sheep and goats and herds them in the village of Carmel. David sends ten of his men to make Nabal an offer: since David and his men did not cause any trouble to him and his flock while they were around, Nabal should welcome the travelling party in hospitality. Nabal refuses to give hospitality to David's men (and therefore to David himself, since the men were representing him), claiming that he does not know who David is. After learning of Nabal's reaction, David decides to go visit Nabal's house with his men in arms. Before David reaches the place, Nabal's wife, the beautiful and intelligent Abigail, intercedes, prostrating with her face on the ground before David and offering a gift to repair the offence made to him and the expeditionary party. This act of personal submission reverses the destiny the house of Nabal was about to meet. Abigail returns home and the following day Nabal dies. David finds out the news about Nabal's death and decides to make Abigail his wife.[2]

The whole story could probably be better read as an episode in a search for theological enlightenment;[3] however, as I will try to stress in the following pages from a strictly socio-anthropological point of view, this tale also carries a rather profane meaning as a pedagogical tale on how to behave in a world of patrons and clients—and well beyond any clues as to the historicity of biblical figures. This perspective is, of course, not the only or the best interpretation. It is simply *a possible* interpretation of the biblical data—from a different angle than the usual historical-critical or literary approaches—enabling an understanding of the ancient Eastern Mediterranean socio-cultural context of many of the stories of biblical literature.

David's tale as plausible?

It is (still) mainstream in the field of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament studies to conceive of David as a somewhat historical figure, even if the biblical depiction of his era does not fully coincide with the profane historical scenarios that scholars can reconstruct of early Iron Age Palestine (ca. 1200–1000 BCE) from archaeology alone, and even when we do not have direct, extra-biblical evidence of the existence of this particular character. I do not mean to discuss such perspectives *in extenso* here, but let us summarily consider, for instance, the recent works of Steven L. McKenzie, *King David*, and Baruch Halpern, *David's secret demons*, which interpret David's tale as essentially apologetic and therefore "embellished" but also with a necessary historical kernel in it. In these treatments the main argument (King David's life) has no anchor in direct archaeological or historical, that is, extra-biblical evidence about a king David.

1. See, for instance, R. Alter, *The David story : a translation with commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*, New York, 1999, p. 135; K. Bodner, *1 Samuel : a narrative commentary* (Hebrew Bible monographs 19), Sheffield, 2009, pp. 231-232; A. G. Auld, *I & II Samuel : a commentary* (Old Testament library), Louisville, 2011, p. 265.
2. See further R. Alter, *The David story* (*supra*, n. 1), pp. 152-161; K. Bodner, *1 Samuel* (*supra*, n. 1), pp. 260-273; A. G. Auld, *I & II Samuel* (*supra*, n. 1), pp. 293-302; also S. L. McKenzie, *King David : a biography*, Oxford, 2000, pp. 96-101.
3. "The main point of the stories of David's narrow escapes is theological. They show Yahweh's presence with him and against Saul," S. L. McKenzie, *King David* (*supra*, n. 2), p. 93.

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Both scholars offer instead what they deem historical reconstructions of this figure based essentially on textual approaches and rationalistic assumptions about an ancient biblical storyline, making thus David's historicity at least plausible for the modern reader.[4]

A similar interpretative strategy can be found among scholars who hold a more "centrist" position between traditional historicist approaches to biblical narrative, like the examples mentioned above, and rather sceptic positions regarding the amount of historical information we have in the Bible.[5] The "centrist" strategy consists in imagining plausible historical scenarios in which to place biblical characters, integrating the archaeology and epigraphy of Palestine.

Perhaps the best example of such a strategy is to be found in the recent book by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman *David and Solomon*, where both authors have attempted to show by appealing to archaeology and biblical traditions how much historical truth there is behind the narratives of David and Solomon in the Bible.[6] Especially in the first Chapter of the first part of the book, "Tales of the bandit,"[7] the authors seek to find the archaeological, geographical and ultimately historical setting of the story like the one we find in 1 Sam 25. According to Finkelstein and Silberman, "the text seems to preserve some uncannily accurate memories of tenth century BCE conditions in the highlands of Judah—and may contain at least the traces of a reliable, original account of the events of the historical David's earliest career."[8] And they also affirm that "[the] most plausible historical scenario we can propose—based on the passages of 1 Samuel that match the archaeological and anthropological conditions of the tenth century BCE in the highlands of Judah—is that an Apiru-like leader known as David emerged as a local strongman at the time of political chaos,"[9] that is, right before the establishment of the monarchy in Israel, according to the chronological scheme of the biblical narrative.

Not much of this can be maintained, however, if seen from a critical anthropological and historical perspective, as attestations of old memories do not necessarily imply a degree or a confirmation of historicity. Rather, in some sense, the historiographical atmosphere of those quotations from the precedent paragraph resembles traditional biblical archaeology and its quest for biblical historicity, even though the authors—especially Finkelstein since the mid-1990s—have been critical of such an approach.[10] Even more, when the authors indicate that "the true, historic David, as far as archaeology and historical sources can reveal, gained his greatest fame as something of a bandit chief,"[11] and they appeal to the work of the British social historian Eric Hobsbawm on social banditry[12] in order to provide this depiction with historical analogies, they fall into

4. S. L. McKenzie, *King David* (*supra*, n. 2); B. Halpern, *David's secret demons : Messiah, murderer, traitor, king*, Grand Rapids Mi., 2001. See the review of these works in S. Isser, *The sword of Goliath : David in heroic literature* (Society of biblical literature, Studies in biblical literature 6), Atlanta, 2003, pp. 100-179. Isser links the David story with other heroic tales, like Homer's epics and King Arthur's legend (pp. 46-51). Also B. Becking, "David at the threshold of history : a review of Steven L. McKenzie, *King David : a biography* (2000), and Baruch Halpern, *David's secret demons : Messiah, murderer, traitor, king* (2001)", in *Enquire of the former age : ancient historiography and writing the history of Israel*, ed. by L. L. Grabbe (European Seminar in historical methodology 9 – Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament studies 554), London, 2011, pp. 197-209.
5. On the latter position, and dealing with David, see for instance the critical approach in N. P. Lemche and T. L. Thompson, "Did Biran kill David? The Bible in the light of archaeology", *Journal for the study of the Old Testament* 64, 1994, pp. 3-22.
6. I. Finkelstein and N. A. Silberman, *David and Solomon : in search of the Bible's sacred kings and the roots of Western tradition*, New York, 2006. For a critical review, see T. L. Thompson, "Archaeology and the Bible revisited : a review article", *Scandinavian journal of the Old Testament* 20, 2006, pp. 286-313.
7. I. Finkelstein and N. A. Silberman, *David and Solomon* (*supra*, n. 6), pp. 31-59; see also I. Finkelstein, "Geographical and historical realities behind the earliest layer in the David story", *Scandinavian journal of the Old Testament* 27, 2013, pp. 131-150.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
10. See the previous volume, I. Finkelstein and N. A. Silberman, *The Bible unearthed : archaeology's new vision of ancient Israel and the origin of its sacred texts*, New York, 2001, esp. pp. 4-24. But cf. T. L. Thompson, "Archaeology and the Bible revisited" (*supra*, n. 6).
11. I. Finkelstein and N. A. Silberman, *David and Solomon* (*supra*, n. 6), p. 31.
12. Cf. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive rebels : studies in archaic forms of social movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*, Manchester, 1959; Id., *Bandits*, London, 1969. A previous use of Hobsbawm's analysis of banditry with respect to the *ḫabiru* and the origins of Israel can be found in M. L. Chaney, "Ancient Palestinian peasant movements and the formation of premonarchic Israel", in *Palestine in transition : the emergence of ancient Israel*, ed. by D. N. Freedman and D. F. Graf (Social world of biblical antiquity series 2), Sheffield, 1983, pp. 39-90, esp. pp. 72-83; cf. also R. B. Coote and K. W. Whitelam, *The emergence of early Israel in historical perspective* (Social world of biblical antiquity series 5), Sheffield, 1987, pp. 92-94.

the same trap in which some social-science approaches in biblical studies have fallen by fitting a biblical image or depiction of a character or a particular situation, not evidenced by archaeology or found in the epigraphic record, into a social-science model in order to support what could be deemed a claim to historicity by analogy.[13]

Although the perception of David as a kind of bandit in the story of 1 Samuel may certainly be correct in some way (see further below), its description outside of a sociological context of banditry—perhaps because the emphasis is rather on the question of historicity—leaves us with a faulty use of the biblical text for a critical historical interpretation. In fact, Hobsbawm's proposal of social banditry throughout history as a means of social protest and concern for the poor and the weak has been criticized by the Dutch social anthropologist Anton Blok who, very appropriately, indicates that "there is more to brigandage than just the fact that it may voice popular protest. […] Rather than actual champions of the poor and the weak, bandits quite often terrorized those from whose very ranks they managed to rise, and thus helped to suppress them," and that "Hobsbawm's comparative treatment of banditry over-emphasizes the element of social protest and obscures the significance of the links which bandits maintain with established power-holders."[14] Accordingly, the ethno-historical analogy of David as a bandit proposed by Finkelstein and Silberman, following Hobsbawm's study of the phenomenon, should be better replaced by Blok's address of the subject since in 1 Samuel 25 David is not voicing social protest nor is he concerned with the poor, but he is instead attempting to expand his political influence and build power relations for himself. But this is how the (biblical) story goes, not history.

Taking into account the previous considerations, the question of historicity comes quickly to a dead end in terms of historical interpretation as, in the absence of concrete proofs, it is replaced by plausibility and informed guesses. In this context then, and attending to the main purpose of this paper, it is rather from the socio-political context of Syria-Palestine that we can profit when reading an ancient story like the one we find in 1 Samuel 25.

1 Samuel 25 and the socio-political world of patronage in Syria-Palestine

If we leave the historicity-by-plausibility issue aside, we can focus instead on the social context presumed in the narrative of "David as a bandit" and consider the socio-political message the story bears. As noted above, it is indeed possible to agree in principle with Finkelstein and Silberman's comparison of David's behaviour with the Late Bronze Age's *ḫabiru* elements.[15] The Akkadian term *ḫabiru* refers to outlaws or fugitives, mentioned especially in the El Amarna letters—the diplomatic correspondence from the fourteenth century BCE between the Egyptian Pharaoh and his Near Eastern monarchical peers and, especially, his Syro-Palestinian subjects—but also in other Near Eastern textual corpora, and they were once identified as the biblical Hebrews roaming in Western Asia before the conquest and settlement in Canaan.[16] However, far from being the biblical Hebrews, they were not an ethnic but instead a socio-economic element in Syro-Palestinian society in the second millennium BCE—even though in some episodes and parts of the Old Testament, as in 1 Samuel, the term "Hebrew" is in fact a synonym of the term *ḫabiru*.[17] Furthermore,

13. See, for instance, J. W. Flanagan, "Chiefs in Israel", *Journal for the study of the Old Testament* 20, 1981, pp. 47-73. Cf. the criticism in E. Pfoh, *The emergence of Israel in ancient Palestine : historical and anthropological perspectives* (Copenhagen international seminar), London, 2009, pp. 69-86.
14. A. Blok, "The peasant and the brigand : social banditry reconsidered", *Comparative studies in society and history* 14, 1972, pp. 494-503 (here pp. 496 and 502). See also P. Sant Cassia, "Banditry, myth, and terror in Cyprus and other Mediterranean societies", *Comparative studies in society and history* 35, 1993, pp. 773-795, revisiting Hobsbawm's and Blok's arguments.
15. On the *ḫabiru* see J. Bottéro, *Le problème des Ḫabiru à la 4e rencontre assyriologique internationale* (Cahiers de la Societé asiatique 12), Paris, 1954; M. Greenberg, *The Ḫab/piru* (American Oriental series 39), New Haven, 1955; M. Liverani, "Il fuoruscitismo nella Siria de la Tarda Età del Bronzo", *Rivista storica italiana* 77, 1965, pp. 315-336; O. Loretz, *Habiru-Hebräer : eine sozio-linguistische Studie über die Herkunft des Gentilismus* ʿibrî *vom Appelativum* ḫabiru (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift des Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 160), Berlin, 1984; N. P. Lemche, "Ḫabiru, Ḫapiru", in *Anchor Bible dictionary. 3, H-J*, D. N. Freedman ed. in chief (Anchor Bible library), New York, 1992, pp. 6-10; P. Bry, "Les 'Hébreux' dans la Bible : *ʿibrîm* et *habiru*", *Semitica et Classica* 1, 2008, pp. 39-60.
16. Cf. O. Loretz, *Habiru-Hebräer* (*supra*, n. 15); N. P. Lemche, *The Israelites in history and tradition* (Library of ancient Israel), Louisville KY, 1998, pp. 58-60; M. Liverani, *Le lettere di el-Amarna. 1, Le lettere dei "Piccoli Re"* (Testi del Vicino Oriente antico 3/1), Brescia, 1998, esp. pp. 18-24.
17. This is a "transfer of a social term to the literary sphere", as N. Na'aman put it. See further N. P. Lemche, " 'Hebrew' as a national name for Israel", *Studia theologica* 33, 1979, pp. 1-23; N. Na'aman, "Ḫabiru and Hebrews : the transfer of a social term to the literary sphere", *Journal of Near Eastern studies* 45, 1986, pp. 271-288.

from a socio-political perspective, they were a reckless and disruptive factor for the Late Bronze Age petty kingdoms since the *ḫabiru* did not have permanent loyalty to a single polity but rather hired themselves out as mercenaries, attacking the small urban centres of the region, or at times they roamed the roads assaulting trading expeditions and caravans.

The *ḫabiru* were in fact a kind of outlaws, but they were not necessarily politically inscribed in a chaotic or anarchical situation—as a superficial reading of the El Amarna letters, or the biblical pre- or early-monarchical context Finkelstein and Silberman propose, would lead us to believe. They inhabited instead what we could characterize as a socio-political world articulated by a structure of patrons and clients at different levels of a hierarchical and pyramidal network.[18] In such a world, the *ḫabiru* were therefore defined as a negative example: they were refugees and outlaws because they were never at home (they did not belong to any house or kingdom) and, in socio-political terms, they had not an established patron ruling them.[19]

Patron-client relationships are documented in the ethnographic and ethno-historical records of virtually the whole world, including of course the Mediterranean basin and the Middle East.[20] The basic structure of the relationship entails, in short, a dyadic and notably asymmetrical bond between an individual with power and resources of any kind (the patron) and another individual without power or resources (the client) who consents to be in the relationship. The asymmetrical situation of the bond implies that the patron sets the conditions through which a particular exchange of protection for loyalty and assistance, or material resources for debt, is carried out. This basic dyadic structure can be extended and multiplied in a way that a certain patron becomes the client of a greater patron and this one can become the client of an even greater patron, constituting a pyramidal structure of ascending and descending ties of protection, loyalty and reciprocity.

The patron-client bond is always personal and voluntary and it is non-institutionalised in society. Therefore, when analysing ancient textual sources in search of patronage, we must attend to the explicit actions, behaviour and practices of individuals rather than to the formal institutional spheres they belong to or are attached to: in the North-West Semitic world a "king" *(mlk)* may be the head of a state organization but he may also be the patron of a very small polity structured through family and personal ties. In fact, this kind of patrimonialism, and not an impersonal bureaucracy, seems to be the ruling socio-political order in Syro-Palestinian kingdoms of the Bronze Age.[21] And patron-

18. On patronage in ancient Palestine and the Old Testament, see N. P. Lemche, "Kings and clients : on loyalty between the ruler and the ruled in ancient 'Israel'", *Semeia* 66, 1995, pp. 119-132; Id., "Justice in Western Asia in antiquity, or Why no laws were needed!", *Chicago Kent law review* 70, 1995, pp. 1695-1716; Id., "From patronage society to patronage society", in *The origins of the ancient Israelite states*, ed. by V. Fritz and P. R. Davies (Journal for the study of the Old Testament supplement series 228), Sheffield, 1996, pp. 106-120; Id., "Power and social organization : some misunderstandings and some proposals, or Is it all a question of patrons and clients?", in N. P. Lemche, *Changing perspectives. 3, Biblical studies and the failure of history* (Copenhagen International Seminar), Sheffield, 2013, pp. 158-168; T. L. Thompson, " 'House of David' : an eponymic referent of Yahweh as godfather", *Scandinavian journal of the Old Testament* 9, 1995, pp. 59-74; Id., "He is Yahweh; He does what is right in His own eyes : the Old Testament as a theological discipline. 2", in *Tro og historie : festskrift til Niels Hyldahl*, red. L. Fatum og M. Müller (Forum for bibelsk eksegese 7), København, 1996, pp. 246-263; R. Westbrook, "Patronage in the ancient Near East", *Journal of the economic and social history of the Orient* 48, 2005, pp. 210-233; E. Pfoh, *The emergence of Israel* (*supra*, n. 13), pp. 121-160; Id., "Loyal servants of the king : a political anthropology of subordination in Syria-Palestine (ca. 1600–600 BCE)", *Palamedes : a journal of ancient history* 8, 2013, pp. 25-41.
19. This would explain well the secondary use of the term in a pejorative manner in the El Amarna letters (N. P. Lemche, *The Israelites* [*supra*, n. 16], p. 60); cf. G. E. Mendenhall, *The tenth generation : the origin of the biblical tradition*, Baltimore, 1973, pp. 65-77; M. Liverani, "Farsi Habiru", *Vicino Oriente* 2, 1979, pp. 65-77.
20. Cf., among a vast amount of studies, J. K. Campbell, *Honour, family, and patronage : a study of institutions and moral values in a Greek mountain community*, Oxford, 1964; J. Boissevain, "Patronage in Sicily", *Man* NS 1, 1966, pp. 18-33; *Patrons and clients in Mediterranean societies*, ed. by E. Gellner and J. Waterbury, London, 1977; J. Leca, Y. Schemeil, "Clientélisme et patrimonialisme dans le monde arabe", *International political science review* 4, 1983, pp. 455-494; S. N. Eisenstadt and L. Roniger, *Patrons, clients and friends : interpersonal relations and the structure of trust in society*, Cambridge, 1984; A. Maçzak, *Ungleiche Freundschaft : Klientelbeziehungen von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (Deutsche historisches Institut Warschau, Klio in Polen 7), Osnabrück, 2005; *Clientèle guerrière, clientèle foncière et clientèle électorale : histoire et anthropologie*, sous la dir. de V. Lécrivain (Sociétés), Dijon, 2007.
21. See J. D. Schloen, *The house of the father as fact and symbol : patrimonialism in Ugarit and the ancient Near East* (Studies in the archaeology and history of the Levant 2), Winona Lake IN, 2001; also E. Pfoh, *Syria-Palestine in the Late Bronze Age : an anthropology of politics and power* (Copenhagen international seminar), London (in press).

client bonds, reaching beyond kinship ties, coexist very well within a patrimonial order. There are actually many clues in the textual sources from the ancient Near East, at least since the second millennium BCE, which indicate that this particular socio-political articulation was active in Syria-Palestine and affected every order of the social life: politics, economics and religious imagination. In fact, it can also be identified throughout the whole of biblical narrative in different instances, from the interaction between different human characters to the relationship between Yahweh and his messiahs or his chosen ones.[22]

Thus, having in mind this socio-political regime, we can now understand David's actions in 1 Samuel 25 as fully inscribed in a patron-client pattern of political behaviour and expectations, a view that explains better the tale than linking it just to social banditry and that widens our understanding of the depicted action within a particular socio-cultural and socio-political realm.

A Hebrew *mafioso* in the mythic world of the Bible

The story of David the outlaw and his men may in effect be understood within a clear hierarchical pyramidal network: David is in a first instance King Saul's client (1 Sam 16:21) and then the Philistine king's client (1 Sam 27:5-6), but only because Yahweh allows this subordination to be.[23] Yahweh is in fact David's true and ultimate patron in the biblical narrative. From a more mundane perspective, he becomes an outlaw when Saul's behaviour as a bad patron (1 Sam 18:8-19:10) prompts David to break away from Saul's patronage (1 Sam 21:11). We find also in the whole story the situational or relational ambiguity proper of patron-client links: David is a client loyal to his superiors, but he is also, at the same time, the protecting patron of his own men.

Without invalidating other readings of the tale, I think there is one specific manner of interpreting it from the perspective of social anthropology—especially the social anthropology of traditional Mediterranean societies. As a patron of his men in the wilderness, David attempts to create more bonds of asymmetrical reciprocity with potential clients in order to get access to new resources, human and material, and so expand his leadership. Nabal in this context is therefore a potential client, who foolishly refuses to be under David's patronage—as the pun in his name indicates, he is a fool *(nbl)*, he cannot escape his literary fate and he is the negative example in this tale, refusing to give hospitality to the stranger and failing thus to acknowledge a potential patron.[24] But the clever Abigail understands soon and well what entails David's offer and rapidly comes to David's attention, representing a positive example to be considered by the audience of this tale. David then abstains from attacking Nabal's house (his patrimony in goods, people and resources). Nabal eventually dies of a heart-related condition (in fact, beyond pure human physiology and well into biblical anthropology),[25] getting out of David's way, thus Yahweh and not David becoming responsible for his death—so preserving David's honour and prestige, but also avoiding blood-guilt and preventing Abigail from avenging her dead husband.[26] David later marries Abigail, coming thereby to own Nabal's house, and the story ends happily, showing in a didactic manner how things turn out well for those who know how to behave and obey their patron.[27]

For certain, and as it was indicated above, each aspect of this story can be documented or evidenced in many cases from the ethnographic record of the Mediterranean, in particular rural Sicily, from the nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, where interpersonal conflict is always latent due to the competition for control of material and human resources.[28] In fact, interpersonal conflict plays a very important role in granting personal

22. See T. L. Thompson, *The Bible in history : how writers create a past*, London, 1999, *passim*.
23. See *ibid.*, pp. 45-50. The language of the story—involving terms like "house," "father," "son," "servant," etc.—is clearly depicting patronage, as Thompson argues.
24. On the rule of hospitality in Mediterranean societies, cf. J. Pitt-Rivers, "The law of hospitality", in his *The fate of Shechem or the politics of sex : essays in the anthropology of the Mediterranean* (Cambridge studies and papers in social anthropology 19), Cambridge, 1977, pp. 94-112.
25. One must differentiate in this context between the humanistic "social anthropology", referred to so far in this article, and the theological "biblical anthropology" in this sentence. On the causes of Nabal's death, see M. O'Rourke Boyle, "The law of the heart : the death of a fool (1 Samuel 25)", *Journal of biblical literature* 120, 2001, pp. 401-427.
26. T. L. Thompson, *The Bible in history* (*supra*, n. 22), p. 47. See further on such a context of feud and *vendetta*, J. Black-Michaud, *Cohesive force : feud in the Mediterranean and the Middle East*, Oxford, 1975, pp. 33-85.
27. Cf. T. L. Thompson, "House of David" (*supra*, n. 18), pp. 70-71.
28. See J. Boissevain, "Patronage in Sicily" (*supra*, n. 20); A. Blok, "Peasants, patrons, and brokers in Western Sicily", *Anthropological quarterly* 42, 1969, pp. 155-170; Id., *The mafia of a Sicilian village, 1860–1960 : a study of violent peasant entrepreneurs*, Oxford, 1974; P. Schneider, "Honor and conflict in a Sicilian town", *Anthropological quarterly* 42, 1969, pp. 130-

honour, and vice versa "personal [honour] also has an aggressive function as it becomes a resource in the struggle for power, a means of rationalizing and justifying [an individual's] purposeful efforts to expand his patrimony at the expense of others,"[29] an explanation that could fit very well for David's actions in 1 Sam 25, depicting him then as a sort of Hebrew *mafioso*,[30] trying to impose patronage by force and therefore distancing himself from the "normal" procedures of patron-client relations, which involve a voluntary engagement in asymmetrical reciprocity by both parties.

These ethnographic analogies, however, do not make David's story necessarily historical nor prove the presence of some historical kernel in 1 Samuel by means of ethnography or archaeology, as intended by many biblical archaeologists and scholars.[31] The pattern of David's adventures as a runaway living in the desert, escaping from punishment or death, is found in other, much older stories from the ancient Near East, especially the one of King Idrimi of Alalaḫ, but also in the tale of Sinuhe the Egyptian and in the biography of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria:

> Idrimi's tale offers us early variations of the young adventurer who, like Esarhaddon, is the youngest of his brothers. Many other elements of Idrimi's story parallel David's: the threat to the hero and his flight to the desert; his life with the Hapiru for seven years; the struggle for his kingdom with his band of followers; the thoughts he thinks that no one else does; the threat to his life by his own patron; efforts to negotiate an amnesty and make peace with his king; oaths of allegiance; acknowledgment and love given him; a military campaign ending in his triumphal entry to Alalakh; the building of a house and the regulation of the proper cult in the city and entrusting it to his son.[32]

The mere detection of this narrative pattern, proper of folklore and fairy-tales, and especially the lack of archaeological evidence for these concrete actions, takes us apart from considering primarily the historicity of these episodes, replicated in biblical narrative, and leaves us instead with no early history of David to reconstruct in the highlands of Palestine, in spite of ethnographic analogies in the motif of David as a bandit or a runaway. Ethnographic analogies are instead proper evidence of the socio-cultural world of many of the Bible's stories, set in an ancient Eastern Mediterranean political environment. Rural patronage politics have been active now for thousands of years in the region,[33]

154; J. Black-Michaud, *Cohesive force* (*supra*, n. 26), pp. 119-128.

29. P. Schneider, "Honor and conflict" (*supra*, n. 28), p. 144. See also J. Pitt-Rivers, "Honor and social status", in *Honour and shame : the values of Mediterranean society*, ed. by J. Peristiany, London, 1965, pp. 19-78; C. Cassar, *L'honneur et la honte en Méditerranée* (Encyclopédie de la Méditerranée 32), Aix-en-Provence, 2005. For a critical appraisal of the "anthropology of the Mediterranean" and its comparative value, cf. D. Albera, "The Mediterranean as an anthropological laboratory", *Anales de la Fundación Joaquín Costa* 16, 1999, pp. 215-232; *L'anthropologie de la Méditerranée*, sous la dir. de D. Albera, A. Blok, C. Bromberger, Paris, 2001; *La Méditerranée des anthropologues : fractures, filiations, contiguïtés*, sous la dir. de D. Albera et M. Tozy, Paris, 2006. For an "honour and shame" approach to biblical stories, cf. *Honor and shame in the world of the Bible*, guest ed. V. H. Matthews and D. C. Benjamin (Semeia 68), Atlanta, 1996.
30. Reference to David as a *mafioso* was first made, to the best of my knowledge, by S. L. McKenzie, *King David* (*supra*, n. 2), p. 97: " 'Nabal' infuriated David with an insulting refusal of David's request for provisions. The request really amounted to extorsion—'protection money' paid to a mafioso."
31. Cf. the otherwise important study by L. E. Stager, "The archaeology of the family in ancient Israel", *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental research* 260, 1985, pp. 1-35; also I. Finkelstein and N. A. Silberman, *David and Solomon* (*supra*, n. 6); and the majority of scholars as well.
32. T. L. Thompson, *The Messiah myth : the Near Eastern roots of Jesus and David*, New York, 2005, pp. 285-289, here p. 285. These parallelisms were first recognized by G. Buccellati, "La 'carriera' de David e quella di Idrimi, re di Alalac", *Bibbia e Oriente* 4, 1962, pp. 95-99; see also M. Liverani, "Partire sul carro, per il deserto", *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli* 22, 1972, pp. 403-415; and *Le jeune héros : recherches sur la formation et la diffusion d'un thème littéraire au Proche-Orient ancien*, éd. par J.-M. Durand, T. Römer et M. Langlois (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 250), Fribourg – Göttingen, 2011; J. Vidal, "Summaries on the young Idrimi", *Scandinavian journal of the Old Testament* 26, 2012, pp. 77-87. Further, on biblical and classical parallelisms, cf. T. L. Thompson and P. Wajdenbaum, *The Bible and Hellenism : Greek influence on Jewish and early Christian literature* (Copenhagen international seminar), Durham, 2014.
33. On the Mediterranean economy of ancient Palestine, see T. L. Thompson, *Early history of the Israelite peoples : from the written and archaeological sources* (Studies in the history of the ancient Near East 4), Leiden, 1992, pp. 316-334; on the human geography of ancient Syria-Palestine, see J. Sapin, "La géographie humaine de la Syrie-Palestine au deuxième millénaire avant J.-C. comme voie de recherche historique. 1-3", *Journal of the economic and social history of the Orient* 24, 1981, pp. 1-62; 25, 1982, pp. 1-49, 113-186. On the ecological and human conditions of patronage in modern Sicily,

so in the end it would be a futile effort to attach David's behaviour in this story to a particular historical context[34] or to use it to reconstruct ancient Israelite history in empirical fashion, be it a political biography based on how chiefs rise to power, an example of royal propaganda or a general model on state emergence during the early Iron Age.[35] The history of Palestine in this early stage of the first millennium BCE lies rather elsewhere, in the archaeology and the epigraphic records of this period, and not in biblical stories and their representations of mythic heroes and other characters, whose main purpose is to offer theological insight and understanding of the world to a particular ancient audience (or readership).[36]

Final comments

With these brief notes I have tried to show, by taking a concrete textual example, how social anthropology and the ethnographic record can provide us with a contextual reading of social behaviour and practices as they appear in some biblical tales—and apart, but perhaps in a complementary manner, from the classical exegesis of historical-critical methods. This kind of micro-ethnography of ancient stories—and not the search for the historicity of what is actually a mythical discourse—should be one of the present goals of critical research on the Bible as an ancient textual source: supplying biblical narrative with a cultural and a social context, in order to approach our historical understanding of its stories to the intellectual world of the ancient Near Eastern scribes behind the production of biblical texts.[37]

I said in the beginning that the present analytical value of the story was somewhat profane rather than theological. Yet, we must acknowledge too that both aspects were actually intertwined, and probably inseparable, in the worldview of ancient Near Eastern stories and tales.[38] And once we incorporate a patron-client socio-political articulation in our reading of some of the Bible's accounts, we may find that the actions attributed to David, but especially to Nabal and Abigail, who play opposite roles in the story, could certainly find their echo in a proper theological message regarding a general attitude towards the divine in the ancient Levant as expressed in biblical literature: to be always kind, humble and wise, for we never know when we will be put to the test by our patron!

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see J. Boissevain, "Patronage in Sicily" (*supra*, n. 20); A. Blok, "Peasants, patrons, and brokers" (*supra*, n. 28); among other important and seminal studies. On the Mediterranean in general, cf. the classical study by F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II*, London, 1972-1973, and the recent evaluation in P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The corrupting sea : a study of Mediterranean history*, Oxford, 2000.

34. Even if we concede that some memories in 1 Samuel, such as place-names, might belong to the tenth century BCE, as I. Finkelstein and N. A. Silberman (*David and Solomon* [*supra*, n. 6], pp. 33-40) do, we still do not have any confirmation of David's historicity; see the following footnote.
35. Cf. S. L. McKenzie, *King David* (*supra*, n. 2); B. Halpern, *David's secret demons* (*supra*, n. 4), pp. 208-242 *et passim*. H. M. Niemann noted the ethnographic (ethno-historical, actually) comparison between the character of David (and Solomon) and Ḍâhir b. ʿUmar, sheikh of Galilee in the eighteenth century CE: cf. H. M. Niemann, "The socio-political shadow cast by the biblical Solomon", in *The age of Solomon : scholarship at the turn of the millennium*, ed. by L. K. Handy, (Studies in the history and culture of the ancient Near East 11), Leiden, 1997, pp. 252-299 (here pp. 265-267). However, possibility does not mean historicity. In fact, this ethno-historical example shows that the story of "David the *mafioso*" is based on ubiquitous socio-political conditions in Palestine present in most periods of the region, from the second millennium BCE to more recent times; see in this respect R. B. Coote and K. W. Whitelam, *The emergence of early Israel* (*supra*, n. 12), pp. 88-92.
36. Cf. T. L. Thompson, *The Bible in history* (*supra*, n. 22), *passim*.
37. See E. Pfoh, "Anthropology and biblical studies : a critical manifesto", in *Anthropology and the Bible : critical perspectives*, ed. by E. Pfoh (Biblical intersections 3), Piscataway NJ, 2010, pp. 15-35.
38. Cf. still the perspective in M. Liverani, "La concezione dell'universo", in *L'alba della civiltà : società, economia e pensiero nel Vicino Oriente antico. 3, Il pensiero*, dir. e coordinamento di S. Moscati, Torino, 1976, pp. 437-521, esp. pp. 491-499.