



David in the Gospels

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DAVID, ANCESTOR OF JESUS

David emerges most visibly from the pages of the New Testament as the great forebear of Jesus Messiah. Both Matthew and Luke trace Jesus' ancestry through David's line (Matt 1:6; Luke 3:31). The point of genealogy writing, a common literary genre in the ancient world, was not to record historically accurate data, but to honor an important figure's stature, fame, significance and, in particular, noble birth. A fair amount of invention was acceptable.

The ancestry that Matthew provides for Jesus is devised along the lines of biblical genealogy writing, such as the five generations for Samuel (1 Sam 1:1) and Saul (1 Sam 9:1), nine for David (Ruth 4:18–22), and the early chapters of 1 Chronicles, notably the Davidic genealogy provided for Zerubbabel (1 Chr 3:16–19). For "Jesus Christ, the son of David," Matthew employs the artifice of structuring his genealogy in three phases of fourteen generations: first, from Israel's origins until the establishment of David's rule over the twelve tribes; second, from that "golden age" when King David ruled over a united "twelve tribes" of Israel until the apparent extinguishment of his line, when his descendant King Zedekiah witnessed his sons being killed before being blinded himself and taken prisoner to Babylon (Matt 1:11; see 2 Kings 24:6–7); and third, from this low point, through the years of continued hope for a renewal of the Davidic kingship, until

The New Testament portrays Jesus as the descendant of David in a variety of ways: David is the ancestor of Jesus Messiah; he is a typological model for Jesus, establishing Jesus' credentials for kingship; he is the inspired singer of psalms, which show most clearly how it had to be that the Christ would suffer and so enter his glory.

the birth of Jesus “who is called Christ.” Matthew establishes Jesus’ claim to Davidic lineage through “Joseph, son of David” (Matt 1:20), Jesus’ father in the eyes of the law.

Luke’s genealogy for Jesus is more like the Greco-Roman genealogies commonly composed for emperors, writers, and philosophers, which make them descendants of the gods. Luke works backwards, from Jesus to “Adam, son of God.” Of the seventy-seven names in his genealogy, thirty-six are unknown in the biblical tradition. David is simply mentioned in the course of the genealogy, but Luke prefaces his list with the information that when he began his ministry Jesus was about thirty years of age, a reminder, perhaps, of David who was the same age when he began to reign over all Israel (2 Sam 5:4). Luke, too, identifies Joseph as “of the house of David” (Luke 1:27), pointing out that Bethlehem, David’s birthplace, is also Joseph’s “own city” (Luke 2:3–4).

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According to all three synoptic evangelists Jesus is “Son of David.” In Semitic thought, to be “a son of” is not merely, or even always, a matter of genealogy. The term “son” can point to character, as in the case of James and John, “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17), and Joseph Barnabas, “a son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36). Even the designation “son of God” can mean someone who exemplifies characteristics associated with God—a godly person, as we might say today (see Matt 5:9, 45, 48). To call Jesus “Son of David” is, therefore, to say that he is a David-like figure. More profoundly, it is to affirm that, in the resurrection of Jesus, God has fulfilled the promise made to David through Nathan the prophet: “I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father and he will be my son” (2 Sam 7:13–14).

This conviction lies behind what is believed to be a very early profession of faith quoted by Paul in the opening lines of Romans. Paul states that Jesus was “descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead” (Rom 1:3–4). Another form of this assertion appears in a later composition, attributed to Paul: “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David” (2 Tim 2:8). The development of the Christian claim that Jesus was descended from David in the period before the composition of Romans (i.e., before the late fifties C.E.) predates the attribution of the title “Son of David” to Jesus in the synoptic gospels (composed in the 60s to 80s).¹ This means that occasions in the gospels when char-

¹John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 218; Dennis C. Duling, “The Promises to David and Their Entrance into Christianity: Nailing Down a Likely Hypothesis,” *New Testament Studies* 20 (1973) 55–77.

acters refer to Jesus as “Son of David” tell us what the evangelists and their contemporaries thought of Jesus, not necessarily how the historical Jesus’ contemporaries viewed him during the time of his ministry.

DAVID, “FATHER” OF JESUS

In several synoptic healing stories, the supplicants cry out “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me/us” (Bartimaeus in Mark 10:47–48; cf. Luke 18:38–39; the two blind beggars in Matt 9:27; 20:30–31; and the Canaanite woman in Matt 15:22). In these stories the address to Jesus as “Son of David” tends to convey the initial approach to Jesus. Some of these stories are paradigmatic portrayals of the process of enlightenment (an early term for Christian initiation), others of a progression from incipient faith to a decision to follow Jesus. This may indicate that “Son of David” as a title for Jesus developed in a liturgical setting, possibly as part of a creedal formula such as that quoted by Paul in Rom 1:3–4.

Reference to Jesus’ Davidic sonship also occurs in Mark’s and Matthew’s versions of the triumphal procession into Jerusalem. According to Mark 11:9–10, the crowd shouts out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David.” In Matt 21:9, they sing, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” The crowd’s acclamation comes from Ps 118 (v. 26). In later Jewish interpretations of this psalm, v. 22, “The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone,” comments on God’s surprising choice of the youngest son of Jesse for anointing as king designate (1 Sam 16:1–13).² Although the Jewish reading postdates the New Testament, the use of this line in Mark 12:10–11, Luke 20:17, and Acts 4:11 clearly stems from a similar messianic reading current in the contemporary Judaism. Clearly, Ps 118 (a familiar psalm because of its association with the feasts of Passover and Tabernacles) had an important role in early Christian reflection on the Scriptures. We should note, however, that “Son of David” is the crowd’s appellation for Jesus. The narrative itself subverts the nationalistic interpretation of the title by presenting Jesus as the peaceful and humble “anti-king” of Zech 9:9.

David appears as a model for Jesus in the controversy story found in Mark 2:23–28, Matt 12:1–8, and Luke 6:1–5. Jesus draws an analogy between his own action in allowing his disciples to pluck grain on the Sabbath and David’s, as described in 1 Kings 21:1–6. The point may be a critique of Torah observance taken to miniscule extremes. However, there is probably a suggestion here that Jesus is the expected ruler who, like the idealized David of 2 Sam 23:1–7, judges justly (see 1 Sam 30:21–25 and Isa 16:5).

The logic of the question about the “Son of David” (Mark 12:35–37; Matt 22:41–46; Luke 20:41–44) depends on a view of David as “author” of the psalms,

²See the Targum to Ps 118 in Brian Walton, *Biblia Sacra Polyglotta* (London: Thomas Roycroft, 1657). For an English translation of the relevant verses, see Margaret Daly-Denton, *David in the Fourth Gospel: The Johannine Reception of the Psalms* (Leiden: Brill, 2000) 181.

which developed in Second Temple Judaism. The synoptic evangelists all indicate that they take the biblical superscript to Ps 110—"Of David"—quite literally and that they hear the "voice" of David, inspired by the Spirit of God (Mark 12:36; Matt 22:43) addressing his as yet unborn descendant as "my Lord" in the opening line of the psalm. The debate about this psalm, which this scene clearly reflects, seems to presuppose that Ps 110 refers to the mysterious origin of the Messiah. The Scripture, therefore, must contain a contradiction. If the Messiah is "Son of David," why is David the psalmist calling him "my lord"? If Jesus is the Messiah, then the anomaly is resolved. Jesus' resurrection and heavenly enthronement have shown him to be "Son of God" and therefore David's "Lord."³ One senses behind this gospel scene a certain reserve about assigning the title "Son of David" to Jesus. Descent from David is not easily reconciled with Jesus' dignity as "Lord." As we will see, the reserve detectable in the synoptics towards the title "Son of David" becomes, in the Fourth Gospel, complete avoidance of the title.

DAVID'S STORY, PARADIGM FOR THE PORTRAYAL OF JESUS

The gospel presentations of Jesus are shot through with motifs associated with Davidic kingship—the status of the king as Son of God, as shepherd of the twelve tribes, and as judge and expounder of the law, for example. In the passion narratives this "Davidic" portrayal of David is intensified. The Deuteronomistic history tells of a period of profound suffering in David's life, the conspiracy of Absalom (2 Sam 15–18). Reminiscences of this episode in the gospel passion narratives invite the hearer to draw interpretive conclusions from either the similarities between David and Jesus or the differences. For example, Matthew's detail that Ju-

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das went out and hanged himself (Matt 27:3–5) serves to cast him in the role of Ahithophel, David's betrayer (2 Sam 17:23), thereby hinting at a parallel between David and Jesus. Luke makes a similar comparison by means of imprecatory passages from two "Psalms of David" spoken by Peter "against" Judas (Acts 1:18–20, quoting from Pss 69 and 109). The theme of betrayal by a confidant is common to the "passions" of both David and Jesus (2 Sam 15:31; 16:23; Matt 26:20–25 and parallels). Like Ahithophel who plots to take King David at night (2 Sam 17:1), Judas arranges for the arrest of Jesus by night (Mark 14:17, 30; Matt 26:31; Luke 22:53, 66). The announcement of the defection of the disciples and of Peter's denial and their protestations of loyalty on the way to the Mount of Olives (Mark 14:29–31; Matt 26:30–35; Luke 22:33) is strongly evocative of 2 Sam 15. There,

³On this "solution," see Donald Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 144.

walking sorrowfully towards the Mount of Olives (2 Sam 15:30), aware of the defection of those close to him, David receives pledges of loyalty from faithful servants (2 Sam 15:15, 21). Like the David of 2 Sam 15:30–31, a distressed Jesus prays on the Mount of Olives. It is also possible that 2 Sam 17:1–2, where Absalom says, “I will come upon him while he is weary and discouraged...and all the people with him will flee,” may have influenced the shaping of the synoptic arrest scenes.

The Fourth Gospel account of Jesus’ death begins with a recollection of David’s crossing of the Kidron on his departure from Jerusalem with his loyal followers at the time of Absalom’s conspiracy (1 Sam 15:23; John 18:1).⁴ A foreigner, Ittai the Gittite, says to David, “As the Lord lives, and as my lord the King lives, in whatever place my lord shall be, whether it be for death or life, there shall your servant be.” Echoes of this declaration of loyalty can, perhaps, be heard in John 12:26: “If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also.” Earlier in John’s narrative, Caiaphas has given advice: “You do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish” (John 11:50). On comparison with 2 Sam 17:3 (“You need only seek the life of one man and all the people shall have peace”) Caiaphas sounds suspiciously “Ahithophelian.” In John, Jesus’ dead body is lavished with an abundance of spices and accorded a royal burial in a garden tomb (see 2 Kings 21:18, 26; Neh 3:16), as befits the Davidic king par excellence (John 19:39–42). These intimations of a connection between David and Jesus combine to develop the Johannine interpretation of the death of Jesus as his exaltation and royal enthronement.

Fourth Gospel echoes of the biblical presentation of David are not confined to the passion narrative. The Johannine portrayal of John the Baptist is based on Samuel, not on Elijah, as in the synoptics. Like Samuel, John the Baptist does not himself know who the king designate is. He is enabled by means of a divine communication to recognize Jesus as the anointed king. Both Samuel and the Baptist experience an inspired moment of recognition involving a manifestation of the Spirit (John 1:32–34; 1 Sam 16:6–10). For the Fourth Evangelist, John the Baptist is “not the light,” but a provisional lamp shining until the coming of the definitive light (John 1:8–9; 5:35). This is quite similar to a view of Samuel found in Pseudo-Philo’s *Biblical Antiquities*, a Jewish rewriting of Biblical history dating from the first century C.E. The reason for this Samuel-like portrayal of John the Baptist is, of course, to point to the David-like-ness of Jesus.⁵

In the writing prophets, there is a tendency to project features of the remembered and reimagined David onto the expected descendant of David and even to

⁴The link is clearer in the original Greek as both texts refer to the χεῖμαρρος of the Kidron, the winter-flowing stream bed.

⁵*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (LAB) 51:3–4; see J. Harrington, “Pseudo-Philo: A New Translation and Introduction,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth, vol. 2, 297–377 (New York: Doubleday, 1985) 366; Charles Perrot and P. M. Bogaert, eds., *Pseudo-Philon: Les Antiquités Bibliques* (Paris: Cerf, 1976) 333–337.

refer to him as “David” (Hos 3:5; Jer 30:9; Ezek 34:23; 37:24). Similarly the Fourth Evangelist alludes to David’s youthful career as a shepherd, in effect an apprenticeship for kingship, which involved putting his life on the line to protect his sheep (1 Sam 17:34–36; 19:5). Jesus is the ideal or model shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:1). When the Johannine Jesus speaks of there being “one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16), there is an unmistakable allusion to Ezek 37:22, 24, 25.⁶

Even from these few examples, it is evident that the Fourth Evangelist’s appeal to the figure of David is quite different to that of the synoptics.⁷ It is significant that none of the biblical texts that he draws upon requires Davidic genealogy for the expected king. The connection is typological. Our present-day appreciation of the diversity of the many “Judaisms” that existed at the time of Jesus and our recognition that there was no single coherent or normative messianic theory allows us to see how it was possible in the first century C.E. for non-dynastic forms of Davidic messianism to co-exist with the more genealogically expressed manifestations of the Davidic hope to which Matthew and Luke appealed.

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The apparent subtlety of John’s hints of a connection between David and Jesus has frequently been interpreted as avoidance of such a linkage. Twentieth-century Johannine scholarship has insisted that the great biblical “model” for the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel is Moses. This is believed to reflect the presence in the community behind John of Samaritan Jews, whose Scriptures excluded the “David” materials, whose worship traditions ignored the Jerusalem Temple, and whose hope for a redeemer figure focused on the “prophet like Moses” of Deut 18:18. Clearly the author of the sublime prologue to the Gospel sees no theological significance in Jesus’ earthly origins. Jesus is never presented as a descendant of David in John, nor ever called “Son of David.” The only references to Davidic descent and birth in Bethlehem come in a scene where people assume that Jesus does not qualify for messiahship on these grounds (John 7:42). Yet the author’s hope in writing this gospel is that his audience might come to faith in Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of God,” surely an interpretation of Jesus that originates in Davidic messianism. John’s is the only gospel where the word “messiah” not only appears, but is translated and explained (1:41). Perhaps the function of such Davidic motifs is to show a partial understanding of Jesus, an initial grasp of Jesus’ identity that will develop into a full confession of Johannine faith, such as Thomas’s, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28). Possibly, though, the author also sees in David a symbol of the

⁶For a more detailed account of these David-Jesus links, see Daly-Denton, *David*, 302–315.

⁷For further suggestions of links between the Johannine passion narrative and the David narratives, see Daly-Denton, *David*, 292–302.

unity of the twelve tribes, and in a David-like Jesus the potential for a gathering into one of all Israel (John 11:52).

DAVID THE PSALMIST, INSPIRED PROPHET OF JESUS

The tradition of the young David's musicianship in 1 Sam 16:14–23, his composition of a lament for Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1:17–27), and the inclusion of Ps 18 in 2 Sam 22 provided a biblical basis for the conception of David as psalmist which developed during the Second Temple period.⁸ The presupposition of Davidic "authorship" (an honorific attribution similar to that of the Pentateuch to Moses and of Proverbs to Solomon) influenced the shaping of the Psalter and led to the addition of titles linking individual psalms with events in David's life. By the first century C.E., the memory of David had undergone extensive reworking. As founder of the temple and its cult, he was idealized as a man of prayer, a prophet, and a wisdom teacher. In the writings of the first-century C.E. Jewish historian Josephus, David's therapeutic music-making for Saul (1 Sam 16:14–23) has become "psalmody" and "hymnody" (*Ant.* 1.166). Josephus even praises David's proficiency in poetic metres and skill as an instrument maker (*Ant.* 7.305). The Greek Bible's Psalm 151 and the five extra-canonical "Psalms of David" preserved in Syriac are all part of David's literary "afterlife." Several previously unheard of psalms were brought to light with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Attributed to David, but actually dated to the period around the turn of the era, they are included in selections of the canonical psalms without differentiation, witnessing to ongoing pseudepigraphical psalm writing, pursued "under the mantle" of David.⁹ Perhaps the most fascinating insight into first-century perceptions of David is the account of his writings found in the "Psalms Scroll" from Cave 11. Here David, described as "wise, and a light like the light of the sun, and literate, and discerning and perfect in all his ways before God and men," is credited with a total of 4,050 psalms, written "through prophecy which was given him from before the Most High."¹⁰

An indication of the extent to which the Davidic "authorship" of the psalms was a "given" for the gospel writers is the way the memory of David's story is often informed by a combination of the narrative traditions and the psalms. Turning momentarily to Luke's "Volume 2," we find that when Stephen says that David wanted "to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob," Luke is not drawing on the narrative traditions (2 Sam 7:2–6; 1 Kings 8:17–18; 1 Chr 17:1–14; 2 Chr 6:7–8) but on Ps 132:5, where David the psalmist says that he will not rest until he has found "a place for the Lord, a dwelling for the God of Jacob" (Acts 7:46). Similarly, in Acts

⁸On the revision of the memory of David, see Walter Brueggemann, *David's Truth in Israel's Imagination and Memory* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); Jouette M. Bassler, "A Man for All Seasons: David in Rabbinic and New Testament Literature," *Interpretation* 40 (1986) 159–169; and Daly-Denton, *David*, 59–113.

⁹J. H. Charlesworth and J. A. Sanders, "More Psalms of David," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985) 611–624.

¹⁰J. A. Sanders, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967) 137.

13:22 the Lucan Paul draws on Ps 89:20 as well as 1 Sam 13:14 when he presents God as raising up David to be king and saying of him, “I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my own heart.” The same principle underlies Luke’s use of Pss 69 and 109 in Acts 1:18–20, mentioned above.

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It would be expected that New Testament psalm usage would show traces of this association of the psalms with David. It is evident, for example, when all four evangelists apply a motif from the psalms concerning the treachery of an intimate friend and table companion to Judas (Mark 14:18; Matt 26:23; Luke 22:21; John 13:18). The motif occurs in Ps 41:9 and Ps 55:12–14. Jewish readings of these passages interpret them as laments of David over the treachery of Ahithophel.¹¹ All four evangelists use material from Pss 22 and 69 in their accounts of Jesus’ death. While the synoptics allude verbally to these psalms, John uses explicit citation and, in the case of Ps 22:18, midrash in motion, a dramatic enactment of the prophecy (John 19:23–24). While David is not mentioned, he is “behind the scenes” as supposed author. The whole point of placing the psalms on the lips of Jesus is that David is ancestor of the Messiah (the synoptic view) or a prophetic prefiguration of Jesus (the Johannine view). The psalms tell of how David experienced betrayal, torment, isolation, and, eventually, the deliverance that gave rise to the praise that characteristically follows his laments. For the first Christians, David’s experience prefigures Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

It is Luke who most clearly articulates the rationale for early Christian psalm usage. David wrote in Ps 16, “You will not let your Holy One see corruption.” Clearly David died, so he was not talking about himself, but, “being a prophet,” he wrote about the resurrection of the Christ, his descendant (Acts 2:25–31). As the Lucan Peter explains, “the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David, concerning Judas who was guide to those who arrested Jesus....For it is written in the Book of Psalms, ‘Let his habitation become desolate and let there be no one to live in it’ and ‘His office let another take’” (Ps 69:25 and Ps 109:8, as quoted in Acts 1:16–20). Through God’s servant David (“author” of Ps 2) God spoke in the Holy Spirit about what would happen in Jerusalem when Herod and Pilate plotted with the Gentiles “against the Lord and against his Anointed.” Even Luke’s remark that Herod and Pilate became friends (Luke 23:12) serves to underline the fulfilment of Ps 2 and its presumed author’s role as inspired prophet.

¹¹Targum Ps 55:14; Midrash on Psalms 55.1; M. Aboth 6:3. See Daly-Denton, *David*, 193–196.

In this presentation, we have seen three ways in which David figures in the gospel portrayals of Jesus. He is ancestor of the Messiah, “Son of David.” He is a typological model for Jesus whose credentials for kingship can be established on the non-dynastic basis of David-likeness. He is the inspired singer of the psalms which, of all the Scriptures, show most cogently how it had to be that the Christ would suffer and so enter his glory (Luke 24:27, 44). ⊕

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