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Who Was King David?

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The title of this article implies that David was a historical character, an assumption fiercely contested by some scholars. The recent discovery of one and possibly two inscriptions bearing David's name and dating from a little more than 100 years after the time when he is supposed to have lived (ca. 1000 B.C.E.) probably justifies this assumption.[1] The inscriptions actually refer to the "house of David"—the nation of Judah or its ruling dynasty. They do not, therefore, prove the existence of David the individual, although it is fair to say that they place the burden of proof upon those who would deny his historicity. However, the inscriptions also highlight the fact that the Bible is the only extant source for information about David, since there are no other archaeological remains that mention him or can be attributed to him. The likely existence of a historical David does not necessarily mean that the Bible's portrait of him is historical. Therefore, the nature of the literature about David in the Bible must be carefully considered.

DAVID IN THE BIBLE

There are three large sections or books of the Bible that relate to David: 1 Samuel 16–1 Kings 2, 1 Chronicles, and Psalms. The first of these is by far the most

[1]The two inscriptions are the Tel Dan and Mesha steles. See Avraham Biran and Joseph Naveh, "An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan," *Israel Exploration Journal* 43 (1993) 81–98, and "The Tel Dan Inscription: A New Fragment," *Israel Exploration Journal* 45 (1995) 1–21; and Andre Lemaire, "House of David Restored in Moabite Inscription," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 20/3 (May/June 1994) 30–37. For treatments of both, see Steven L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 11–15.

The historian can justifiably assume the actual existence of David, but a critical reading of the biblical material produces a much less flattering picture than the one that takes the Bible at face value. The unapologetic picture raises the question of how a righteous God could support such a ruthless man.

important for the search for the historical David. First Chronicles (ca. 350 B.C.E.) is largely a rehearsal of 2 Samuel with changes introduced by the author of Chronicles for theological reasons. It offers little independent information about David and hence is not particularly useful for historical reconstruction. Seventy-three of the 150 psalms contain headings associating them with David. But both the originality and the meaning of these headings are uncertain (they do not necessarily claim authorship), and in any case the psalms themselves, apart from the headings, give no details about David's life.

Scholars generally view 1 Samuel 16–1 Kings 2 as part of a larger work called the Deuteronomistic History (DH for short) that encompassed the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings. In its present form, the DH can, of course, be dated no earlier than the last event it relates (ca. 562 B.C.E.), but most scholars think that it incorporates older sources, some of which may have originated in David's reign. More important than the possible existence and age of sources is the nature of the DH's story about David. Scholars have long noted the apologetic flavor, especially of the story of David's rise to kingship in 1 Samuel and the early chapters of 2 Samuel. "Apology" in this sense means defense or explanation. Above all, David's status as a usurper, that is, the fact that he succeeded Saul but was not his heir, called for legitimation. First Samuel explains that Saul was rejected and David divinely chosen as his replacement.

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Other elements of the DH's story of David appear designed to justify his actions or otherwise account for a suspicious turn of events—especially when a prominent person who stands in David's way dies. A good example of such an explanation is in 2 Sam 21:1–14, which tells how David had seven of Saul's sons and grandsons executed at the request of the Gibeonites in order to save Israel from a famine that Yahweh had sent as punishment for Saul's violation of a treaty with the Gibeonites. It is difficult not to suspect that the story was intended to cover up David's real motive for the execution of Saul's heirs, namely his desire to secure power by ridding himself of potential rivals, especially since the one survivor, Mephibosheth, was lame (2 Sam 4:4) and therefore unqualified to reign.

Apology and History

The apologetic nature of the biblical account is itself an argument for David's historicity, for who would invent suspicious deeds of the past just to try to justify them? Recognition of the apologetic nature of the story of David in the DH shows that it cannot be read at face value as history. The very objective of apology is to

give a colored view of past events and their causes. But recognition of the nature of the literature also provides a way to get behind the apology and thus approach the historical David. The assumption is that the biblical authors are like modern "spin doctors"; they do not deny certain events—perhaps because they were well known—but attempt to explain the circumstances surrounding them or the motives of the characters involved. The historian approaches the biblical narratives with suspicion about their explanation of David's motives in particular. This kind of reading goes "against the grain" or contrary to the apparent intent of the authors. Where the narrative seems to be answering a particular accusation against David, the historian suspects the veracity of the accusation ("where there's smoke there's fire"). In the case of 2 Sam 21:1–14, the "bottom line" is that David had Saul's heirs executed. The biblical story explains the circumstances and David's motives, denying that he acted for political reasons. Hence, the critical reader suspects that his motives were indeed political.

Certain techniques may aid the critical reader in this effort to uncover history. Above all, there is *analogy*. David's actions and motives would have been analogous to those of other Near Eastern rulers and human beings in general. There are plenty of instances, both in and outside of the Bible, of rulers who obliterate the progeny of their predecessors in order to ensure their hold on power. By analogy, then, one assumes that this was David's reason for executing Saul's heirs. Another helpful technique is that of *cui bono* (who benefits?)—the idea that the primary benefactor of a given deed was likely its perpetrator. The absence of any heirs to Saul's kingship would certainly have benefited David as it would have eliminated the threat of rivalry from Saul's family. Some scholars have pointed to *overstress* as another useful technique. The more the biblical writers seem to emphasize David's innocence, the more the modern reader suspects his guilt ("where there's more smoke there's more fire"). Second Samuel 21:1–14 stresses David's innocence in the annihilation of Saul's house by several means: it is necessary in order to save Israel from famine; it is Saul's own fault as revealed by divine oracle; it is not David's idea but the request of the Gibeonites. Finally, occasional oddities in the narratives about David raise questions about what may really have happened. The fact that there is no account in the Bible of an effort by Saul to wipe out the Gibeonites suggests that the story may have been invented by David's apologist. The placement of this story in 2 Samuel is also odd. David's question in 2 Sam 9:1, "Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul?" suggests that the account of the deaths of Saul's heirs must have preceded it. Did an editor move 2 Sam 21:1–14 to its present position in order to deflect suspicion that David acted early in his reign to secure his hold on power?

A Historical Portrait of King David

The image of David that emerges from such a critical reading is, of course, much less flattering than one that takes the Bible at face value. It is undeniably speculative, but it is at least a plausible and realistic answer to the question of who David was.

Nobleman

First Samuel 16:18 describes David as a nobleman (the best translation of the expression rendered "man of valor" by NRSV) who comes to Saul's attention for his skill first as a *musician* and then as a *warrior*. The more popular image of David as a poor shepherd boy (1 Sam 16:1–13) plays on the common ancient Near Eastern metaphor of the king as shepherd. David's father likely owned significant land and livestock, the measures of wealth in that society, and David may have tended sheep in his youth, but this was not his vocation. Archaeology indicates that a population explosion around 1000 B.C.E. placed a premium on land resources and would have diminished the inheritance of youngest sons like David, driving them into alternative careers such as those of musician and military service. Since music was believed to have magical powers to keep evil spirits at bay, musicians were a typical fixture in royal courts. The lyre, which David played, was the instrument of the wealthy, again indicating his noble origin. The description of David as a "man of war" may reflect a mercenary background after he left home. While the famous story of David and Goliath is legend, it hints at David's skill and intelligence as a soldier, which catapulted him to prominence in Saul's domain.

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Courtier

The stories in 1 Sam 18–20 attest the qualities of intelligence, eloquence, and charm suggested by the expressions "prudent in speech" and "a man of good presence" in 1 Sam 16:18 (NRSV). According to these stories, Saul's own children, Jonathan and Michal, in addition to "all Israel and Judah," came to love David for his charm as well as his military success (1 Sam 18:16). Only Saul, inflamed by jealousy, plotted to get rid of David in a series of increasingly overt attempts on his life. But David's ambition, evident in his willingness to risk his life to become the "king's son-in-law" (18:20–29), and the admission that the army (the sense of "all Israel and Judah") "loved" David—an expression carrying overtones of political loyalty—raise doubts as to whether Saul was quite so insane as the writer depicts him. The stories in these chapters advocate David's innocence in the rift that developed between him and Saul so strongly that one wonders whether David may actually have been a *conspirator* in an attempt to overthrow Saul. This is speculative, but it would account for the vehemence of Saul's rage against David and the force with which the narrative denies any wrongdoing on David's part (overstress).

Outlaw

Forced to flee from Saul, David became a *fugitive* in the Judean wilderness, which had always been a harbor for persons on the fringes of society. He quickly gathered around him a small army of the disenfranchised, including his own relatives (1 Sam 21:1–2). They survived by raiding villages and estates in the area. The story in 1 Sam 27:8–12 indicates how *ruthless* David and his band could be as they wiped out entire towns to prevent their Philistine overlords from learning the true identity of those whom they plundered. David's power in this area grew so that he apparently became a *rival chieftain* of Saul's and a force to be reckoned with by the Philistines, who in 1 Sam 21:10 [Heb. 21:11] call him David the "king of the land." The Philistines dealt with him, to judge from 1 Sam 27–29, by hiring him as a *mercenary* in charge of guarding their southern border. The stories contend that while he served the Philistines David's loyalty remained with Saul and Israel. But it may have been an alliance between David and the Philistines that finally proved too much for Saul and resulted in his defeat and death. David reigned seven and one-half years over Judah, while Saul's successor, Ishbosheth, reigned only two years (2 Sam 2:10–11), leaving open the possibility that David became king of Judah while Saul was still alive. If so, the Philistines would have found it necessary to establish some kind of treaty with their former mercenary. Saul was prepared to fight the Philistines on his west, but the introduction of a second, formidable opponent on his southern flank could have been what overwhelmed him.

Assassin

One of the estates that David and his band threatened was that belonging to "Nabal" and his wife Abigail. Nabal (meaning "fool" and likely a caricature rather than a genuine name) was wealthy and probably chief of the Calebites, the leading clan of Judah. His death, described in 1 Sam 25 as God's doing, occurred at a most propitious moment for David, who married Abigail and assumed Nabal's property and social position. It would have been a short step from the Calebite chieftaincy to kingship over Judah. David would rule from the Calebite capital of Hebron during his seven and one-half years as king of Judah. As the main benefactor of Nabal's death, David is also the primary suspect in the effort to determine its cause. The story admits that David intended to wipe out Nabal's household because of the latter's insulting reply to what amounted to an extortion attempt from David. Nabal's was only the first in a series of assassinations of prominent figures engineered by David in his rise to power.

The deaths of Saul and Jonathan, Saul's general Abner, and Saul's successor Ishbosheth (Ishbaal) all paved David's path to the throne. The biblical writers exert themselves to deny David's involvement with Saul's and Jonathan's demise. This is the focus of the entire section from 1 Sam 24–2 Sam 1, which argues that David did not kill Saul when he had the opportunity (1 Sam 24; 26), that Saul's death was ordained by God (1 Sam 28), that David was far away from the battlefield where Saul met his end (1 Sam 29–31), that Saul died at the hands of the Philistines (1 Sam

31), and that David executed the man who claimed to have finished Saul off (2 Sam 1). But the very effort to defend David implicates him, as does the great benefit he received from the passing of the king and crown prince, and the later denunciation by the Benjaminite Shimei (2 Sam 16:7–8) is nothing short of indictment. Abner's assassination occurred at the hands of Joab, David's army commander and confidant, who was never punished by David (the invocation of Abner at Joab's execution decades later [1 Kings 2] is a smokescreen obscuring Joab's support of Solomon's brother and rival, Adonijah, as the real reason for his removal). Ishbosheth's assassins were his own men (2 Sam 4). David had them executed as he did the Amalekite who claimed to have terminated Saul. But just as the Amalekite had brought him Saul's crown, so now David ended up with Ishbosheth's head.

"David might be considered the first true king of Israel"

King

David might be considered the first true king of Israel. Saul is best described as a chieftain rather than a king. His domain appears to have been confined to the highlands of Benjamin and Ephraim and bore none of the features typical of ancient Near Eastern monarchies. These were introduced by David and developed further by Solomon. David consolidated Israel and Judah and established a neutral capital in Jerusalem, complete with a royal residence. He removed the Philistine threat and led successful excursions against some of the other neighboring peoples. He made political alliances with other kings and chieftains. He sealed those alliances with marriages and gathered a harem. He centralized the government in Jerusalem and appointed a cabinet and a standing army, which included both an "honor guard" and a royal body guard. These achievements should be kept in perspective. David's "palace" would not have been large or magnificent by modern standards. Jerusalem, his capital, probably had no more than 1500 residents at the time. And careful reading of the Bible reveals that it does not support the claims of a vast empire that have sometimes been imagined for him; but the extent of David's actual administrative control outside of Palestine is uncertain.[2]

Despot

The changes David introduced came at a price to his subjects. The Israelite tribes were taxed and conscripted in order to supply the army and a labor force for David's and, later, Solomon's building projects. A new feudal system of land partition under the crown replaced the old tribal divisions. Judah's exemption from these measures led to resentment that may have fueled the revolt of David's son, Absalom (2 Sam 13–20).

The story of Absalom's revolt casts David as a loving but weak *father* who

[2]For a detailed and innovative treatment of this matter, see Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 107–226.

could not control his spoiled and rebellious sons. Absalom's resentment at his father's failure to punish his half brother, Amnon, for raping his (Absalom's) sister, Tamar, leads him first to murder Amnon and then to revolt against David.[3] Reading the story as apology, however, results in a very different picture of David. At the time of their respective deaths, Amnon and Absalom were each the oldest son and therefore heir to the kingship. Absalom, of course, was in open revolt trying to seize the throne. This raises the possibility that their deaths were politically motivated. That possibility is further enhanced by three features in Amnon's case. First, 2 Sam 13:24–25 notes that Absalom urged David to attend the festival in which he assassinated Amnon. Historically, this makes little sense. But the writer may be stressing the point in order to answer the accusation that David was involved. Second, 2 Sam 13:37–39 states that Absalom fled to his grandfather, King Talmai of Geshur, for three years while David sought him.[4] But David had a treaty with Talmai, must have suspected that Absalom was there, and could have compelled his return. Perhaps Absalom was actually sent to Geshur for safekeeping and appearances' sake. Third, in addition to the threat Amnon represented as David's oldest son, his mother's name, Ahinoam, was also the name of Saul's former wife, and they are the only two women of that name in the Bible. If they were in fact the same woman—and 2 Sam 7:8 refers to God having given "your master's wives" to David—then Amnon may have represented the last possible claimant to the throne through Saul and thus have been doubly threatening to David.

As for the case of Absalom, a motif running throughout this story depicts David as too weak and gentle for his own good in his dealings with his sons (2 Sam 14:21; 18:5; 18:33–19:8 [Heb. 19:1–9]) and his enemies (2 Sam 16:9; 19:22 [Heb. 23]). The "sons of Zeruiah" are blamed for violent deeds. Joab, in particular, kills both Absalom and Absalom's cousin and commander Amasa (2 Sam 20:4–13). This motif is ill suited to the character of David elsewhere in the story as a man who, even on a surface reading of the text, annihilated entire villages of people. It does, however, accord with the apologetic portrayal earlier in 1–2 Samuel where the death of a prominent figure is pinned on someone other than David, whose innocence is demonstrated in part by his profuse mourning. Joab's assassination of

[3]Absalom's revolt, therefore, has its cause in the rape of Tamar. An additional, more theological explanation for it has been added in Nathan's announcement of punishment against David for his affair with Bathsheba and plot against Uriah (2 Sam 12:10–12). That the Bathsheba story is secondary is also indicated by its frank portrayal of David as an *adulterer* and *murderer.* This completely unapologetic tone differs strikingly from the surrounding material. In addition, while Nathan's oracle alludes to the subsequent account of Absalom's revolt, there is no reference in the latter back to the Bathsheba episode. The account of the revolt was originally unrelated to David's sin with Bathsheba.

[4]The point of 2 Sam 13:39 is often misunderstood because of mistranslation. The NRSV reads, "the heart of the king went out, yearning for Absalom." But if David yearned for Absalom, Joab's ruse in 2 Sam 14 designed to convince David to permit Absalom to return would be senseless, as would David's refusal even then to allow Absalom into his presence. The translation of P. Kyle McCarter (*II Samuel*, Anchor Bible 9 [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984] 344) is better: "the spirit of the king was spent for going out against Absalom." David was so angry with Absalom for murdering Amnon that he sought for three years to capture him. The writer is thus able to claim that David loved Amnon deeply and would not have been party to his assassination. It took three years for his anger with Absalom to abate. Of course, he loved Absalom just as deeply thereafter.

Amasa is especially similar to that of Abner. A historian might surmise that what this apology camouflages is a David who maintained power as he had obtained it, through ruthless removal of those who threatened his control, including his own sons.

Impotent

David's final appearance in the Deuteronomistic History (1 Kings 2:1–9) is on his deathbed where he cannot stay warm (1 Kings 1:1), where he issues the decree that Solomon should be his successor (1:11–40), and where he charges Solomon first to obey Yahweh's law and then to see to the executions of Joab and Shimei (2:1–9). This material also appears to be apologetic, but this time for Solomon rather than for David. It attempts to explain why Solomon, rather than the heir apparent, Adonijah, succeeded David. It also tries to justify Solomon's execution of Joab, who supported Adonijah, and of Shimei, Saul's kinsman and leader of the Benjaminites, who threatened the stability of Solomon's reign. Ironically, then, in this final episode of his life story, David's image is manipulated on behalf of someone else. On the literary level and perhaps also on the historical level, in the end the powerful King David became an impotent victim—*flaccid*, *senile*, and a tool for his replacement.

A Theological Problem

Perhaps above all, the David of history, at least as presented here, was a theological problem. How could a righteous God support such a ruthless, violent man? This problem was an important part of the motivation behind the composition of an apologetic account of David in the first place. For modern readers who recognize the apologetic nature of the biblical story the problem remains. A partial solution to the problem suggests itself in Chronicles and Psalms where an idealized portrait of David is presented. For the Chronicler especially, what really happened in the past is not as important as the model that the idealized past may present for the future. The portrait of David as he should have been can also furnish an answer to the question of who David was. After all, history and historical personages are reconstructed to some extent in our own image. The image of the historical David that was presented here may only be possible in an age as cynical about its leaders as ours. Ultimately, our answer to the question, "Who was David?" may say more about us than it does about him. ⊕

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