

Unit 3 Introduction

David: The Man Behind the Legends

Sunday school and Vacation Bible School veterans of a certain age will remember a little song, titled, “Only a Boy Named David.” The boy shepherd armed with only a sling felled the Philistine champion Goliath with a single stone.

Who was this David, the boy behind the sling? Each period of David’s life contributed to the man and the king he became, as well as to the larger-than-life picture the church sometimes writes and preaches of him.

Young Shepherd

David’s father Jesse was the grandson of Boaz and Ruth, of Bethlehem-Judah, five miles south of ancient Jebus/Jerusalem. Even as a town-dweller, Jesse had a small-to-medium-sized flock, probably including some goats along with his sheep; the Hebrew collective noun *tsone* (TSONE, “flock”) often designates a mixed flock. As the youngest of Jesse’s eight sons, David inherited their care when he was old enough to handle it. Still today, in much of the Middle East, one can see preteens shepherding flocks, sometimes miles from the family house or tent.

Growing up just before 1000 BC, David faced a few dangers unknown to today’s young shepherds. When introduced to Saul, David told the king that on at least two occasions he had faced down and killed, first a lion and then a bear, to protect his flock. “This uncircumcised Philistine” held no terrors for him (1 Samuel 17:34-37).

Warrior Hero, Fugitive, Exile

David made good on his promise to defeat Goliath (1 Samuel 17:48-50). Following up with success after success, he soon established himself, first, as Jonathan’s friend; then as the hero of the day among the men and the officers of Saul’s army— “men,” then “officers,” is how that usually happens. Finally, the women who met Saul’s returning troops began celebrating David, chanting, “Saul has slain his thousands, [but] David his tens of thousands” (18:7).

The jealous and unstable Saul tried to kill David outright (18:10-11). Failing that, he sent David on “impossible” missions, but instead of meeting his death in battle, David defeated Israel’s enemies, making him even more popular with ordinary Israelites. Predictably, Saul became both angrier with David, and more afraid of him (18:12-16).

Recognizing that Saul’s increasing mental and emotional instability made him totally unreliable, David became a fugitive, and

technically an outlaw. Other men gathered around his leadership, until he led a small army of about 600 men (1 Samuel 23:13). In desert and other wilderness surroundings, some of which he had known since his shepherding days, David eluded Saul’s attempts to hunt him down, though with a number of close calls. Twice, though he could have killed Saul, David chose not to, recognizing him as God’s anointed (1 Samuel 24; 26).

Finally, to escape the constant danger and uncertainty, David led his men and their families into the lands of Israel’s Philistine enemies. Achish, the “king” of Gath (1 Samuel 27:2), installed David in the small town of Ziklag. Though protecting both Judeans and Philistines by raiding towns and areas hostile to both, David told Achish he was raiding Judean towns (27:8-10), giving Achish (false) reason to trust his new vassal.

The other rulers of the Philistine pentapolis did not trust David, though. Refusing to allow him to join their renewed campaign against Saul, they forced Achish to send David home. He found Ziklag destroyed, his and his men’s families carried off by an Amalekite raiding force. Pursuing and destroying the Amalekites, they rescued all their people, and recovered their goods.

Local King

With the death of Saul and three of his sons on the heights of Gilboa (1 Samuel 31:1-6), everything began to change. David left Ziklag and set himself up as king over Judah at Hebron (2 Samuel 2:1-4). Achish, not yet worried, continued to regard David as his loyal vassal. Achish seemed justified in this, as hostilities continued between David and Saul’s last surviving son. Abner, Saul’s uncle and commander of his army, established Ishbaal (ISH-ba’al) at Mahanaim (ma-ha-NAH-im) in the eastern Jordan Valley. Ishbaal lasted two years (2 Samuel 2:10), before Abner switched his allegiance to David (3:19). Two of Ishbaal’s own captains assassinated him (4:5-7), and with the end of Saul’s house, all Israel soon acknowledged David as king (5:1-3).

While David ruled only Judah, Hebron was an ideal capital, but once he ruled all Israel, it became a political liability. David took Jerusalem, capital of a small Jebusite city-state (5:6-10), making it his own city by right of conquest. Located between Judah and Benjamin, but previously conquered by neither, Jerusalem was a suitably neutral capital from which to rule the newly reunited Judah and Israel. Throughout the rest of David’s reign, Jerusalem (“The City of David,”

5:9) occupied only the eleven-acre ridge just outside the southern wall of today's Old City. Old Testament scholars often refer to this site as the Ophel (OH-*f*l) Ridge.

Finally, Achish and his Philistine confederates became alarmed, and moved to reassert Philistine hegemony. However, David repulsed them in two successive battles, and established himself as the undisputed king of a truly independent Israel (5:17-25).

Regional Suzerain

Chapters 8 and 10 of 2 Samuel summarize the rapid expansion of David's kingdom into a regional empire. Through an unspecified number of years of campaigning, David defeated and subjected all the surrounding peoples: the Philistine confederacy to the west and southwest, Moab east of the Dead Sea, the Arameans of Zobah and of Damascus north and northeast of Israel, Edom south and southeast of Judah and the Dead Sea, and Ammon across the Jordan River east of Israel. Kings came to David each year, or sent high-ranking representatives, to pay their required tribute and renew their pledges of fealty to their suzerain.

David did not confront the Phoenicians along the Mediterranean coast north of Israel. Rather, he responded to the early overtures of Hiram, king of Tyre (5:11), even before David had completely freed himself from Philistine suzerainty. Before this, the Philistines had forged close ties with Sidon, north of Tyre. With David's and Hiram's new partnership, Tyre replaced Sidon as the dominant Phoenician maritime power, and Israel replaced the Philistine pentapolis (Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath, Ekron) as the land power of western Asia. Of course, this land-sea alliance benefited both Israel and Tyre, commercially as well as militarily.

David's and Hiram's successes were possible because both Egypt to the southwest and Mesopotamia to the northeast and east were in periods of relative decline and military weakness. Egypt no longer could control the Levant, as it had done previously under several capable Pharaohs—Egypt never would again. Though both Assyria and Babylonia would conquer the Levant in later centuries, neither was capable of that, yet. Partnering with Hiram, David created what still is regarded as the "Golden Age" of ancient Israel. For the most part, David's son Solomon maintained his father's empire until his own death about 928 BC.

Inept Father

David's last years stand as a definition of epic family tragedy. We could anticipate this through an often unnoticed but telling "detail" in 1 Chronicles 3:1-4. David's first six sons were born while he reigned in Hebron—each the son of a different mother. Fourteen more sons, and Tamar his daughter, are named as David's children born in Jerusalem—born to unnamed wives, except for Bathsheba (3:5-9). David never allowed himself a chance to be a good father.

The trigger event (or non-event) for disaster was David's failure

to lead his army against Rabbah, capital of the small city-state of Ammon east of the Jordan, entrusting the siege to his general (and nephew) Joab (2 Samuel 11:1). At home in his palace, David "happened" to observe from his rooftop terrace the wife of Uriah, one of his best warriors, in her bath. Sending for Bathsheba, he lay with and impregnated her. Attempting to solve his problem, David ultimately arranged, with Joab, Uriah's murder in battle under the wall of Rabbah (11:14-17). Following the birth of Bathsheba's first son, the prophet Nathan called David on this perfidy, promising strife in his own household for the rest of his life (12:1-14).

The first-reported serious episode was the rape by David's eldest son, Amnon, of Amnon's half-sister, David's daughter Tamar; David did nothing (13:1-22). At a "suitable" time, Absalom avenged Tamar—his own full sister—by murdering Amnon (13:23-38). Years later, when David had become effectively impotent as a ruler, Absalom schemed to overthrow his father. His rebellion was nearly successful, but David's army defeated Absalom's. Joab disobeyed David's direct order not to harm Absalom, killing him himself (15:1—19:8).

When David was close to death, his fourth son, Adonijah, attempted to seize the throne, with the help of Joab and others. David had promised Bathsheba their son Solomon would succeed him; Bathsheba's quick action, in concert with others of Solomon's supporters, secured her son the succession David had promised (1 Kings 1:5-53). Adonijah remained a threat to his younger brother, however; only his own foolish actions, prompting Solomon to order his execution, removed it (2:13-25).

In short, as recorded through 2 Samuel 10, David lived an exemplary life, and enjoyed unmitigated success—except for Saul's early attempts on his life, which David survived. Following his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah, the narrative reflects mostly David's stumbling from one set of disasters, heart-aches, sorrows, and grief to another for the rest of his life—to say nothing of how his perfidy affected all Israel. As husband and father, David exemplifies what not to be—what a pity Solomon failed to take notice!

David's Enduring Significance

Despite his abject parenting skills, David leaves Jews and Christians much to thank God for. David was God's agent of deliverance and independence. Also, we could spend many sessions discussing David's influence on Jewish and Christian worship—in the psalms he wrote.

Perhaps above all, David matters as a forefather of Jesus. As such, he remains a blessing to all the world. Moreover, like all of us, David is ultimately and eternally blessed in the Person of this greater Son—"Jesus" (see, e.g., Mark 10:47-48).

JOSEPH COLESON is retired professor of Old Testament at Nazarene Theological Seminary.