



The Books of Samuel

The Rise of David

Our introduction to David comes in three forms. First are the allusions at the end of Saul's reign to the king that will succeed him: the one to whom God will give the kingdom that he has torn from Saul; as God puts it to Samuel, "a man after my own heart." Through these oblique references, we are prepared, as readers, for the rise of a new leader in Israel, superior to Saul in worth. The description of David as a "man after God's own heart" makes its way also into the New Testament, where it is cemented in Christian tradition as the description of David, the ancestor and forerunner of Jesus. (It should be remembered, however, that the notion of Jesus as being of the Davidic line is merely the early Christian appropriation or continuation of the ancient Jewish tradition, beginning already in the later books of the Hebrew Bible, that the messiah would represent the renewal of the Davidic monarchy.)

The second introduction to David comes in 1 Samuel 16, the story of Samuel going to the house of Jesse in Bethlehem to find and anoint the new king of Israel. This story is, in essence, the Cinderella story: the prophet arrives, and is presented with each of Jesse's sons in descending order of age. Each is declared inappropriate, until there are none left—none except the youngest, who is out with the flock. When David is brought in, Samuel declares him the Lord's chosen, and proceeds to anoint him, albeit in secret. We then pivot to the court of Saul, where, just as David is invested with the spirit of the Lord, an evil spirit from God descends upon Saul. By seeming happenstance, one of Saul's advisors knows of a young man—David—who can play the lyre to soothe Saul's spirit. David is brought to Saul, comforts him with music, and is taken into Saul's service permanently, as the king's arms-bearer.

This episode serves as the first step in the longstanding tradition that David composed the psalms: here we have the future king established as a musician. The image of David with the lyre is one that appears regularly in art, although most often in depictions of David as the aged king playing the lyre upon his throne. It should be noted, however, that it says nowhere here, nor in fact anywhere else, that David actually composed the psalms. Later in the book of Chronicles we are told that David arranged for the singing of cultic hymns in the future Temple; again, it does not say that David wrote the psalmic liturgy, only that he was responsible for initiating it as part of Israel's worship. The text to which tradition usually turns for proof of Davidic authorship of the psalms is the psalms themselves, many of which—73 of the 150 in the Hebrew Bible—bear a superscription commonly translated as "A psalm of David." Yet scholars have long recognized that the Hebrew preposition rendered as "of" in the phrase "of David"

can have many meanings, but “written by” is not one of them. The phrase “a psalm of David” may well have originally meant something more like “a psalm about David,” or perhaps “a psalm of the royal court,” in which “David” stands for the monarchy. It is clear that these superscriptions are not original to the psalms to which they are now attached: the Septuagint has more such superscriptions than the Hebrew text; the Dead Sea Scrolls also have more. (In fact, both the Greek text and the Dead Sea Scrolls contain psalms, even ones with the Davidic superscription that are not in the Hebrew at all.) The psalms were an open and expanding corpus well into the late first millennium BCE, and the David superscriptions were likewise later and expanding additions to the corpus.

Our third introduction to David comes in the story of Goliath in 1 Samuel 17, undoubtedly the most famous narrative about David’s life in the entire Bible. It is evident that this narrative is of a separate origin from that of the anointing and lyre-playing in the previous chapter. The Goliath story reintroduces us to David and his family, as if we had not met them all before. It begins with David back home with his father, rather than at the side of Saul—even though Saul, being in battle against the Philistines, presumably would have needed his trusty arms-bearer. Most strikingly, at the end of the chapter, Saul reveals that he has no idea who this young man is: he asks his general, Abner, “whose son is this?” and Abner likewise doesn’t know. At the end of the Goliath story, Saul sends word to Jesse that he will be taking David into his service permanently—precisely as he did at the end of the preceding chapter.

What we have, therefore, is a doublet: two stories that begin and end in the same places (David with his father to begin, and David in Saul’s service at the end), and that serve the same narrative function: to get David into Saul’s court, where he will proceed to make a name for himself. Whether either is true is perhaps somewhat beside the point: the biblical authors use these stories to make clear that David is worthy of the throne, whether through secret anointing or, in the Goliath story, through stepping into the king’s role as the champion of his people, fighting the giant while Saul quivers on the sidelines, and proclaiming one of the great lines in the Bible: “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord of Hosts.”

That said, there is also good reason to think that the Goliath story may well be fiction, or at least highly fictionalized. The problem is not the presence of a giant—in the Hebrew text Goliath stands over nine feet tall, but in the (probably more accurate) Greek version he is just over six feet: tall, especially for that time and place, but not unnaturally so. The problem with the Goliath story is that, according to the Bible, someone else actually killed Goliath. Later in the David narrative we are presented with a list of David’s warriors, each of which, in a style reminiscent of Homer, is described with a one-verse narrative about his great martial exploits. Among these is Elhanan, from Bethlehem—David’s hometown—who, we are told, killed Goliath the Gittite, whose spear had a shaft like a weaver’s beam. It is safe to assume that no author thought it appropriate to take David’s most famous triumph and ascribe it (in highly abbreviated form) to a character who never again appears in the story; it makes far more sense that someone took a brief account of a relative nobody and expanded it to become the shining moment of David’s early military career. (Amusingly, the author of Chronicles recognized this

problem and solved it by telling us that Elhanan did not kill Goliath, but rather the brother of Goliath—who similarly had a spear with a shaft like a weaver’s beam.)

These two opening chapters of the David story serve an important narrative purpose, one that colors all the events that follow. We know, by the time Samuel is done anointing him and David is done killing Goliath that this young man will be the next king of Israel. We thus read everything else that happens in this light, and with this expectation—even though, in fact, the ascent of David to the throne is entirely unexpected in historical terms. He is not of the royal line; he is a nobody from a small backwater town. In the ancient world, such a person could become king only via usurpation, or a coup. This is, of course, not the story that the Bible presents. David was anointed by God’s prophet—thus, when Saul has died on the battlefield, we are not surprised when the wandering Amalekite who plunders Saul’s crown proceeds to bring it to none other than David. But we should be surprised, as perhaps many Israelites living at the time were, that David should become king after Saul. These opening chapters prepare us for this unusual eventuality.

Once David is ensconced in Saul’s court, the story immediately goes down two divergent paths. On one side, we have Saul who is insanely jealous of David’s successes and repeatedly attempts to kill him, certain that David is a threat to his dynastic monarchy. On the other, we have literally everyone else: Saul’s son Jonathan, Saul’s daughter Michal, the army, and the Israelites at large, all of whom, we are told repeatedly and in various ways, love David and support him.

Perhaps most remarkable of all these characters is Jonathan: the crown prince, destined by birth to be king after Saul. Of all the people in the world of the story, Jonathan is the one who should be most concerned about David’s possible challenge to Saul’s rule. And yet we are left in no doubt that Jonathan in fact is the one who loves David most of all. Over and over we are told that Jonathan loves David—and as readers, if Jonathan loves and trusts David, we are obligated to do so as well. But Jonathan does more than love his potential rival. One of Jonathan’s first acts after the defeat of Goliath is to give David his clothes and arms. This is not simply a case of friends trading baseball caps: this is the prince of Israel giving his royal clothing and his royal armor to David. The bestowal of royal garb is a symbolic abdication of Jonathan’s position in favor of David. This sense is heightened by the way that Jonathan speaks to David: deferentially, even asking David to treat him and his house with kindness once Saul is gone—as if Jonathan fully expects that David, rather than he, will become the next king.

Jonathan’s relationship with David has become a standard icon for homosexual interpretation of the Bible, and with good reason: some of the language that is used of their love is decidedly romantic rather than merely platonic. Yet the Bible does not dwell on this aspect of the story; if it is there, it is no more than an understated element of the tale. The text neither condones nor condemns homosexuality here. Rather, the focus is on the way that Jonathan stands in place of the reader, guiding us as to how we should think of David’s future kingship: as anticipated and welcomed, even by the man whose role David will be taking over.

On the flip side of the coin is Saul, whose constant attempts to kill David punctuate the entirety of David’s time in Saul’s court. Saul is very clear that he thinks David to be a threat to his kingship. He says to Jonathan, “As long as the son of Jesse lives on earth, neither you nor your

kingship will be secure” (1 Sam 20:31). Saul is jealous of David’s successes on the battlefield—previously Saul’s claim to fame—and of David’s consequent popularity. All of these emotions—jealousy, suspicion, rage—are presented by the authors as utterly irrational. They are the work of the “evil spirit from the Lord” that seizes Saul. The rhetorical device being used by the biblical authors here is apparent: everyone in Israel loves David except for the one person who is explicitly marked as crazy. The possibility that David is any sort of threat is expressed solely by the man who has already proven himself unworthy and who suffers from irrational fits. In other words: if you think that David was actually trying to take the throne from Saul, you’re agreeing with the Bible’s most famous head case.

The biblical authors are not merely telling us the story of David’s time in Saul’s court. They are using this period of David’s story to make clear to us that during that time David was an honorable and loyal servant of the king, one whose successes were only in Saul’s service and who was loved by all. Indeed, one of the infrequently remarked upon aspects of this section of the story is that although everyone in Israel seems to express their love for David, at no point does David express love for anyone else, Jonathan and Michal included. We get the picture of a man who rides the waves of fortune, who arrives at his position of popularity and strength through no ambition of his own. We are ensured that David was no threat to Saul or Saul’s kingdom.

And yet, in the end, it is hard not to conclude that despite the biblical attempt to portray him as crazy, Saul’s fears could not have been more prescient. David would, in fact, become king after Saul. David would, in fact, be a threat to Saul’s descendants. It is true: as long as David lived, neither Jonathan nor his kingship were secure. Saul comes off as paranoid, but he is a good example of the adage that sometimes paranoid people are right: someone is actually out to get them.

Despite the biblical authors’ repeated and reinforced claims that David was in no way ambitious for the throne, it is a simple fact that no one in the ancient world, and perhaps no one in all of history, has become king without wanting to be king. No one stumbles onto the throne. And though the story tells us that David was anointed by Samuel, we should remember that even in the world of the story that anointing was done in secret, known only to Samuel, David, and David’s father and brothers. It is never mentioned again. Thus, we might put ourselves in the shoes of the ancient Israelite living in these times and wondering how it is that David should have become king after Saul. It would, without knowledge of the prophetic anointing, be impossible to imagine such a thing without concluding that David had wanted it, had been ambitious for it, and had positioned himself appropriately. The chapters of the Bible that narrate David’s time in Saul’s court can be read as a response to such a conclusion: in fact, David did not want the kingship, was not ambitious for it, and simply rode the waves of fortune to the position he eventually attained. Whether we take the biblical version at face value or consider it to be a tendentious retelling depends on where we situate ourselves with respect to the nature of the Bible and the biblical record as a whole.