



KING DAVID: A MAN AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART

From The Bible Project Blog: King David- What's the Big Deal?

by Timothy Mackie

King David is one of the more well-known figures in the Bible, and for good reason. He's actually the most developed and complex character in the entire Old Testament. The amount of pages dedicated to telling his story ([1 Samuel 16](#) through [1 Kings 2](#)) outnumber any other single person in the Bible except for Jesus (who has four entire books in the New Testament!). So, the question is a natural one to ask: Why does David get so much attention? Sure, he was an important king, but in terms of the overall storyline of the Bible, why is David such a big deal? Something about David captured the imagination of the biblical prophets and poets.

The biblical author designed these stories to say something about God's value system that is so different from our own, and in order to generate hope for the future. Let's take a quick survey of David's story.

The No-Name Runt

Unlike Saul, Israel's first king, David didn't have height or muscle going for him (remember how Saul's intimidating stature made him attractive as a royal candidate, [1 Samuel 9:2](#)). God revealed to Samuel that Israel's true king and Saul's replacement would come from the tribe of Judah and the family line of Jesse of Bethlehem (recall the story in [1 Samuel 16](#)). When Samuel showed up, he looked at seven of Jesse's sons, many of whom were also tall and handsome. But God was clear, outward appearance is never a reliable indicator of inward character, "God doesn't see as humans see. Humans see what is outwardly visible, but God sees the heart."). So Jesse fetches the forgotten son of the bunch, who has been out watching the sheep: young David. This, we discover, is Israel's true king. Samuel performs the ancient anointing ceremony that had been performed on Israel's priests, pouring oil over David's head. Here in the family room of his house, David is appointed as the real king of Israel, with no fanfare and no crowds. He's the true king of Israel, but, and this is the catch, no one else knows it yet.

They saw the God of Israel at work in his story in unique and important ways that made him stand out from among all of Israel's kings. The stories of David weren't preserved and crafted merely out of historical interest. This story of David's humble origins came to epitomize the ideal king. A ruler who wasn't exalted over Israel by human expectations or standards. Rather, he was elevated by God's own grace and surprising creativity. It all happened right under Saul's nose, which didn't make him happy.

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The Persecuted King

The contrast between Saul and David's character doesn't end with their story of origins. Most of the story of 1 Samuel goes on to tell of the great hostility that grew between them because of this very difference. David's first and greatest victory over Goliath took place when he rejected Saul's tactics for armor and weaponry and went out on the battlefield to face a gladiator with only his slingshot and faith in his God ([1 Samuel 17](#)). After this, David continued to win favor among the people until his fame overshadowed that of Saul ([1 Samuel 18:7](#), "the women sang, 'Saul has slain his thousands, but David his tens of thousands!'"). Saul couldn't handle not being the center of Israel's attention any more, and so the narrator spends a large amount of time on Saul's growing animosity towards David ([1 Samuel 18-31](#)). This hatred, born from jealousy, eventually develops into an assassination plot. David spends a lot of time on the run, with a crazed Saul chasing him all over the desert.

But even here, we see David's true character shine. He trusts the God of Israel so implicitly that having to flee his wife, his home, or his city doesn't shake his faith in God's providence. David has more than one opportunity to kill Saul (the fascinating "cave" stories in [1 Samuel 24](#), [1 Samuel 26](#)), and he doesn't! He trusts that "God will be the judge between you and me, and he will plead my case and deliver me!" ([1 Samuel 24:15](#)). Time and again, we see David play the role of the humble servant of God, who doesn't assert himself until God opens the opportunity.

The Exalted Servant

David doesn't stay the underdog forever. Saul eventually sinks into madness and ruin, and he's killed in a grisly battle with the Philistines ([1 Samuel 30-31](#)). Even then, David is grieved by the death of his enemy, evidenced by the beautiful poem he writes to honor the memory of Saul and his son Jonathan, David's beloved friend ([2 Samuel 1](#)). From here on, the narrative focuses on God's exaltation of David. His own tribe wants him alone as their king ([2 Samuel 2](#)), and through no effort of his own, the house of Saul entirely collapses ([2 Samuel 3-4](#)). Eventually, all of the other Israelite tribes come and ask him to be king as well ([2 Samuel 5](#)). Once again, David is simply thrust into a position of influence, by doing nothing but waiting for God to work things out. This is the same David who ends up establishing Jerusalem as Israel's capital and prepares it for the construction of the temple ([2 Samuel 6](#)).

You can begin to see why later generations of Israel looked back on this portrait of David with such fondness. Israel never had another king quite like him, with the same combination of incredible talent and extreme humility. He epitomizes the same kind of radical faith that Abraham demonstrated when he looked up at the stars and trusted that God could form an entire nation from him and Sarah (remember [Genesis 15](#)). It's to this "faith-full" David that God makes his next covenant promise in [2 Samuel 7](#), one of the most important stories in the Old Testament. God says that one day he will raise up from David's line a "descendant" (literally in Hebrew, "seed") that will build a temple and rule over an eternal kingdom. This king will be so closely aligned with God's will, he will be like God's son, and God will be this king's father ([2 Sam 7:12-14](#)).

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Now, at this point, Christian readers of the Old Testament are getting really excited! But then you read the next part of the story, which may throw you. God says:

I will be a father to [this future king] and he will be a son to Me; when he commits sin, I will correct him with the rod of men and the blows of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. – [2 Samuel 7:14-15](#)

“Wait a minute,” we say. “When he sins...? I thought this was a reference to the coming of Jesus, but that part doesn’t sound like Jesus.” And you’re right, it doesn’t. That’s because this isn’t a direct messianic prophecy in the sense of prediction and fulfillment. This divine promise is setting you up to read about all of the descendants of David’s line who are going to fail miserably and never live up to the humble faith of their ancestor David. However, after the line of David completes their royal failure and runs the nation of Israel into the ground (welcome to the books of 1 and 2 Kings!), this divine promise still stands. It’s this enduring hope of a future king who will not be like David’s descendants and will not be like David when he took advantage of Bathsheba; this is the seedbed of the biblical prophets’ visions of a future messianic king.

This hope is expressed all over the prophetic books (see [Isaiah 9](#), [Isaiah 11](#); [Jeremiah 23](#); [Ezekiel 34](#); [Micah 5](#), [Zechariah 9](#)). One day, another king is going to come who won’t repeat the failures of Saul. He will be like David, or, as Jeremiah and Ezekiel put it, this new king will simply be “David” ([Jeremiah 30:9](#); [Ezekiel 34:23](#)). These two prophets lived to see the descendants of David get hauled off into captivity in exile, just as God said would happen. But when they looked for the future fulfillment of God’s promise, they didn’t look for a new Saul, or even a new Solomon. Rather, they hoped for a new David, another humble king who would submit to God’s will. A king with radical trust in God his Father, who would allow his Father to exalt him in the proper time. A king who came from Bethlehem like David and who had no outward features to mark him out as God’s anointed one. A servant king like David who wouldn’t shove his way into power. Israel’s true king, who will be persecuted by his fellow Israelites...

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as Israel’s Messiah to patiently wait for God to exalt him as king.*

Let’s allow Jesus to let the cat out of the bag.

In a well-known story, Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grain field on the Sabbath, picking and eating food as they went ([Matthew 12:1-7](#)). Now, according to the interpretation of the Torah held by the Pharisees, this was a form of “work” on the Sabbath. They accuse him of unfaithfulness to Israel’s God, and Jesus responds in a very odd way. He asks if these Pharisees, whose profession it was to read and interpret the Bible, have ever read the Bible (“haven’t you read...?” [Matthew 12:3](#)). Specifically, he wants to know if they’ve ever considered the story about David when he entered an Israelite temple and took the sacred bread that was assigned for the priests alone ([Matthew 12:4](#), alluding to the story in [1 Samuel 21](#)). He also wants to know if they’ve ever thought about the fact that Israel’s priests, who offer sacrifices, also “work” on the Sabbath. Then, to follow up, he says that “one greater than the temple is here” ([Matthew 12:6](#)).

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Now, that's cool, but what does that random story about David and the priests have to do with this conflict Jesus is having with the Pharisees?

Think about it, Jesus picks a story from what period of David's life? [1 Samuel 21](#) comes from precisely that period where David had already been anointed as Israel's true king, but no one else recognized that fact. Israel's leader, Saul, was persecuting David because he was ignorant of God's real purpose to exalt this no-name runt from the tribe of Judah.

By quoting this story from [1 Samuel 21](#), Jesus is putting himself in the place of David, and the Pharisees in the place of Saul. Then he places himself in the role of Israel's priests, who have the unique authority to represent all of Israel before God, and can therefore work on the Sabbath as needed. Then, to top it off, Jesus says that he is the true embodiment, the reality to which the temple has been pointing all along: the reunion of heaven and earth, of God and humanity.

Just like the Old Testament prophets, Jesus saw his role as Israel's messiah to patiently wait for God to exalt him as king. He anticipated persecution from his own people would come, just as it did for David. The stories about David provided the template of Jesus' messianic vocation, and they epitomized the upside-down value system of God's kingdom that Jesus was always talking about. It's a kingdom where the poor and persecuted are the most exalted, and the powerless are God's chosen ones (go and re-read the famous beatitudes in [Matthew 5:1-7](#) and think about them in light of the story of David). When Jesus read the stories of David, it wasn't to learn interesting facts about Israel's history. Like the prophets, Jesus read his Bible as a prophetic history that was pointing towards the future hope of the messianic Kingdom of God. These stories about David were designed to foster that very hope, in Jesus' day, and in our own.

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