

Special Issue: Old Testament, Exodus to Malachi

The King Called David

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David, the sweet psalmist of Israel, anointed as an obscure shepherd boy to be the future ruler of Israel, became the great warrior king who ushered in the golden era of Israel's history.

David, one of the most complex and tragic heroes of all of Israelite history, lived approximately ten centuries before Christ. Yet the shadow of influence he cast across the pages of the past extended even beyond the lifetime of Jesus—in some ways it is still vaguely apparent in our own day. Matthew paid tribute to Christ by calling him “the son of David.” (Matt. 1:1.) Bethlehem, the birthplace of the Master, was called by the angels who attended his birth “the city of David.” (Luke 2:11.) And the angel Gabriel, in announcing the birth of the Messiah to Mary, stated that her Son “shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David.” (Luke 1:32.)

David was without question one of the most influential kings Israel ever produced. Living during the time of a power vacuum in the Near East, he extended the boundaries of Israel's control to their greatest extents, unified Israel administratively to a greater degree than it had ever been since the days of Moses, and ushered in the golden era of Israel's history.

However, the personal life of David was filled with tragedy, and from this suffering were to come some of the most beautifully profound utterances of Hebrew literature, the psalms of David. For not only was David a skilled soldier and statesman, but he was also a sensitive soul, a masterful musician, and a prolific poet.

David appears first in the biblical account as an obscure shepherd boy, the seventh son of Jesse the Bethlehemite. (See 1 Chr. 2:15.) Soon after the disobedience of King Saul, the prophet Samuel went to Bethlehem to choose a successor for the fallen king and there, in a dramatic family gathering, anointed David to be the future sovereign of Israel.

Not much is known of the youthful David from then until he was brought to the aid of the mentally disturbed Saul. As a consequence of his transgressions, Saul had lost the Spirit of the Lord and often fell into states of deep melancholic depression. The servants in his court suggested that music might be an excellent antidote; and one of them volunteered: “Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, that is cunning in playing, and a mighty valiant man, and a man of war, and prudent in

matters, and a comely person, and the Lord is with him.” (1 Sam. 16:18.) With that recommendation David was brought to Saul and assigned to his personal court as armor-bearer for the king.

It was while serving in Saul’s court that David slew Goliath in combat. “Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield,” he told the Philistine giant, “but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel.” He then flung the stone that crashed into Goliath’s head, rendering him unconscious long enough for David to decapitate him with the giant’s own sword. This sword, incidently, was later to become David’s own weapon through a strange turn of events.

The victory was a turning point in the career of the youthful David. His popularity increased dramatically—with all but Saul, whom it alienated. The king, wincing under the unintended insult of the refrain sung by the women of Israel, “Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (1 Sam. 21:11), ultimately began to seek the life of his armor-bearer.

Twice in fits of anger, while David was playing for him, Saul threw his javelin at the young musician. Later he had David placed over a major segment of the army and sent into the thick of battle with the Philistines, hoping that he would be slain by them. On one occasion Saul promised his daughter Michal to David on the condition that he bring back evidence of the death of 100 Philistine warriors. Much to Saul’s chagrin the plot failed; David slew 200 warriors and was soon back to claim his bride.

By that time, however, David was well aware that his life was in constant jeopardy so long as Saul was subject to his sudden fits of anger.

Consequently with the help of his wife, Michal, and his brother-in-law, Jonathan, David escaped from Saul and entered a self-imposed exile and became a fugitive, fleeing from place to place, hiding in cities, caves, and forests; eventually, he sought refuge among the Philistines and Moabites. Aided first by Samuel and then by the Levites in the city of Nob, who fed him with consecrated bread from the tabernacle of the Lord and armed him with Goliath’s sword (which apparently had been sent to the tabernacle at Nob as a type of sacred trophy), David made his way from place to place, avoiding the soldiers of Saul. Soon he was joined by all of the dissidents of Israel, “every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that was discontented” (1 Sam. 22:2), as David began to develop an army of his own.

Guided by Gad, an inspired seer of the Lord, David soon assembled a select guerrilla band of 600 distinguished men of war. His forces were constantly sought out and plagued by the armies of Saul, and twice in these encounters David could have killed Saul; but out of respect for the Lord’s anointed (which Saul still was in the eyes of David), David did not take the king’s life. He did, however, take some of the personal belongings that lay next to where the king slept. Then, after removing himself a safe distance from Saul’s forces, he held up the things he had taken and

called out to the king so that he could see that he had no desire to harm his sovereign but desired only peace. Saul, however, desired not David's help, but his head.

Because of constant harassment, David ultimately decided to leave Israel's boundaries and to unite his forces with Israel's enemies, the Philistines. This time spent with Israel's foes may well have been one of the most important parts of his life, because he was undoubtedly able to become familiar with the Philistine strongholds and with their weaponry. Up to this time the Philistines had had a virtual monopoly on iron, a newly developed metal vitally important in battle.

Achish, one of the Philistine leaders, received David and his 600 warriors and their families and employed them initially as mercenary southern border guards against the non-Israelite enemies of the Philistines. Through this means the Philistines were able to rally their forces for one massive assault on Israel, and this battle proved fatal to the house of Saul. Both the king and his son Jonathan lost their lives, leaving Israel without a monarch. David at the time was 30 years of age, and the southern tribe of Judah claimed him as their king. The other tribes of Israel chose for their king Ishbosheth, the son of Saul.

For seven and a half years Israel and Judah were divided; then, after a dramatic conflict between Ishbosheth and his major military adviser, Abner, which resulted in the assassination of both, Israel, now being without a king, came submissively to David and vowed allegiance to him. Thus David became king of all of Israel.

Immediately the king set about consolidating his gains and establishing his kingdom. His first target was Jebus, the Jebusite city that had been constructed on the ancient site of Salem, the city of Melchizedek near Mount Moriah. Although the fortress surrounding this city was considered nearly impregnable, David's men devised an ingenious plan for penetrating the city through its waterworks, and the city fell to David's new army.

At that point the new monarch entered into a vast rebuilding program for the newly acquired city of Jerusalem, and in this project he was joined by Hiram, king of Tyre, a Phoenician who united his country's fortunes with those of Israel. As a token of his friendship, Hiram transported cedar from the rich forests of Lebanon to Jerusalem and had his craftsmen construct a palace for David. This friendship was mutually beneficial to Hiram, for David's armies defeated all of the rest of their surrounding neighbors and extended the borders of Israel from Egypt to the Euphrates, in fulfillment of an ancient promise made by the Lord to Abraham. Starting with the Philistines (whose strongholds David probably knew personally), the armies of Israel conquered in turn the Moabites to the south, the Syrians to the north (from whom David extracted large quantities of gold and brass), and lastly the Edomites and Amalekites on the south.

To match his conquests abroad, David began a comprehensive domestic program of stabilizing Israel's internal affairs. This led to a complete overhaul of the mechanics of government with his kingdom. One of his early reforms involved the sacred

matters of Israel. Since the days of the prophet Eli, the ancient ark of the covenant (which symbolically represented the presence of God to the Israelites) had been retained at the home of a man named Abinadab, about 12 miles to the west of Jerusalem. David had the ark brought to Jerusalem.

One of David's reforms involved the Levites, who represented the priesthood of God. Ahimelech of Nob, the High Priest of Israel, had initially befriended David as the young exile fled from Saul. In retaliation, Saul had had Ahimelech and all the priests of Nob massacred, and then Saul had appointed Zadok to replace Ahimelech. Zadok had remained the High Priest of the northern tribes of Israel, and another descendant of Aaron, Abiathar, the son of Ahimelech, had been appointed High Priest in Judah. Thus, during David's administration Israel had two High Priests; this continued until the reign of Solomon.

Under inspiration from the Lord, David divided the Levites into courses (quorums?) with different obligations. The Levites who were descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses (the priests), were divided into 24 courses. Sixteen of these were presided over by Zadok and eight by Abiathar. Each of these courses served in the temple from week to week, depending upon a system of drawing lots. The father of John the Baptist, Zacharias, centuries later was such a priest.

The descendants of Levi (other than Aaron's posterity) were also divided into courses with differing responsibilities. Some were to assist the priests at the temple. Others were to serve as officers, judges, keepers of the gates, and guardians of the sanctuaries, and still others were used as musicians in David's vast musical program. Four thousand Levites were selected as musicians and trained for the elaborate choral and instrumental music that was introduced by David into the religious services of Israel.

David was also deeply desirous of building a temple for the Lord. This, however, was not to be his lot, since he had been a man of war and had shed blood. Instead, the Lord revealed to David the plans for the temple, which he, in turn, passed on to his son and successor, Solomon. David also gathered together all of the building materials, and the temple that later bore Solomon's name was a fulfillment of the desires and dreams of his father, David.

In addition to his city building projects, his work with the priesthood and the temple, and his conquest of Israel's enemies—involving the establishment of a standing army—David should be remembered for several other improvements, such as the elaborate governmental bureaus he established. Never again, except under Solomon, was Israel to know such a golden era.

Often a man is best understood in terms of his family and friends. In David's case his closest friends, by birth or by marriage, were often those of his own family. To illustrate some of the deep heartaches and disappointments he experienced in his life, as well as some of the happy times, let us examine his relationships with some of those close to him.

One of the most tragic love stories of the Old Testament is that of David and his first wife, Michal. Their married life together was short, since it took place during the time that David was so unpopular with Saul. David was forced to flee the presence of his young bride because of the hatred of Saul, and he was not to see her again for nearly a decade. When David fled, Michal was so much in love with her young husband that she was willing to risk her own life in order to save David's. She worked out a plan to deceive the guards Saul had sent after her husband and stalled them long enough for David to escape, thus risking the wrath of her own father.

When David fled, Michal was given by Saul to Phaltiel, the son of a man by the name of Laish. What her feelings were about this transaction the Bible does not record. However, we do know that this was intended as a bitter insult to David. As soon as he returned from his exile and it appeared that Israel and Judah would be united under his control, David demanded that Michal be brought back to him.

She is mentioned again in the Bible at the occasion of David's returning the ark of the covenant. When the ark had been brought into Jerusalem, David had stripped himself of his royal robes and, dressed only in the linen ephod of the priest, danced with abandon before the Lord. Michal, watching from her window, deeply resented his actions, "and she despised him in her heart."

When David confronted her later that day, she remarked with sarcasm, "How glorious was the king of Israel to day, who uncovered himself to day in the eyes of the handmaids of his servants, as one of the vain fellows shamelessly uncovereth himself." David quickly retorted that he was not ashamed to have appeared in such a fashion before the Lord, whether it met with her approval or not. Then, in commenting on the resultant consequences, the record simply states, "Therefore Michal the daughter of Saul had no child unto the day of her death." (2 Sam. 6:20–23.) How different might have been the course of this love affair had not David been exiled.

David's relationship with Michal's brother Jonathan was equally tragic, although it ran a somewhat different course. The friendship of David and Jonathan was one of the closest friendships of all times. We are told that when David was brought into the court of Saul, "the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul." (1 Sam. 18:1.) The interesting thing about his relationship is that Jonathan was the heir-designate and was meant to occupy the throne upon the death of his father, Saul. Still, he recognized early in their relationship that David was the one chosen of the Lord, and he desired only to be able to serve at David's side.

When Saul sought the life of David, it was Jonathan who warned him and aided in his escape. Then, later, when Saul and his men were pursuing David, Jonathan came to him secretly in the woods in the wilderness of Ziph to covenant with him that Saul would never find David if he, Jonathan, could prevent it. "Thou shalt be king over Israel," Jonathan continued, "and I shall be next unto thee; and that also Saul my father knoweth." (1 Sam. 23:17.) This was the last time David and Jonathan

met in this life, however, since Jonathan was killed in the same battle with the Philistines in which Saul took his own life.

Out of the love he bore for Jonathan, David later befriended Jonathan's crippled son, Mephibosheth, and honored him by giving him a permanent welcome in the court, and inviting him always to eat at the king's table. David also restored to Mephibosheth the former estates of Saul. Then, in his later years, just prior to his death, David had the remains of Saul and Jonathan removed from their former resting place and interred with honor in the tomb of Saul's father, Kish.

David's tragic love affair with Bathsheba is perhaps too well known to merit extended comment at this point, but it might be well to note that this marriage ended happily. Through his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and his plot to have Uriah, her husband, killed by sending him into the thick of battle, David momentarily lost favor with the Lord. (2 Sam. 12:1–10; Ps. 51; D&C 132:39.) The first son born of this union of passion died, and both parents mourned the loss deeply. However, the second son, Solomon, lived to replace his father as king of Israel. Long before the death of David, the aging king began working with his son, carefully instructing him concerning the building of the new temple and in the affairs of government. David also promised Bathsheba that Solomon would reign after his death.

It must have come as a horrifying shock to Bathsheba when she heard that Adonijah, the eldest living son of David, had laid plans to usurp the throne of his father. While David lay dying, Adonijah was successful in having himself proclaimed king with the help of Joab, David's military leader, and Abiathar, the High Priest. In her hour of terror, however, the prophet Nathan came to Bathsheba to warn and comfort her. This man, who had once been the mouthpiece of the Lord in severely rebuking David and Bathsheba for their act of adultery, now came as a friend.

Nathan instructed Bathsheba to go to David and explain the circumstances in Israel, in hopes that her husband would rally and act in Solomon's behalf. Nathan then promised to visit David immediately after her and confirm all she related. The scene that followed in the meeting with David and Bathsheba was filled with emotion, as she pleaded with her ailing husband to save her and the son of their union. David, feeble though he was, recognized the gravity of the situation and acted to have Solomon anointed king by Nathan in the presence of all the people, thus cutting short Adonijah's bid for kingship and preserving for many years the life of this woman.

Adonijah was not the only son to attempt seizure of his father's crown. He had been preceded in this several years earlier by an older brother, Absalom. One of the most profound tragedies in the life of David revolved around the life of his son Absalom and Absalom's successful attempt to dethrone David temporarily.

David had several children, two of whom were Amnon and Tamar, a boy and a girl from different mothers. Amnon became so infatuated with Tamar that he was

literally wasting away because of his desire for her. Then, through a tragic course of events, Amnon was persuaded to follow a plot that led eventually to his violating his sister's chastity. After this act he hated her and would have nothing more to do with her. Tamar was frantic and made public her disgrace. Her brother Absalom vowed revenge, and two years later he lured Amnon to a remote spot and killed him.

Both events, the rape of Tamar and the murder of Amnon, were crushing blows to David, as they would be to any father, and he was deeply upset. Absalom was banished from the court and only allowed to return after Joab interceded with David in Absalom's behalf. Even then, David would not allow Absalom into his presence until much later. Absalom felt he had been unjustly treated, and after this he pulled a successful coup that led to the expulsion of David from Jerusalem. Once more David became an exile in his own land. A full-scale civil war ensued, and David's trusted and proven troops were able finally to restore him to power. However, the victory came at the expense of the death of Absalom.

David had asked specifically that his troops spare his son, and when he learned of Absalom's death, he was unconsolingly grief-stricken. He covered his face with his hands and cried with a loud voice out of the depth of his anguish, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Sam. 18:33.) Finally Joab became impatient and went to David, insisting that he put aside his personal grief and give thanks to those who had aided him and risked their lives in putting down Absalom's rebellion, lest they think David guilty of ingratitude. Joab's point was well taken, but David's grief provides us with a fascinating insight into the love and forgiveness of which this man was capable.

Joab was one of the most perplexing characters in the life of David, however. He was his nephew and military commander and came to David during the early days of his uncle's exile and aided him until David's death. Because of his loyalty David owed a great debt to his nephew, but Joab constantly tried David's patience at crucial times when David was powerless to discipline him. For example, it was Joab who slew Abner, Ishbosheth's military leader, during the tedious days when David was trying to effect a reunion between Israel and Judah. The act threatened to alienate Israel, but to discipline Joab would be to demoralize the troops of Judah who served under him. Momentarily Joab was out of favor. Then, when David's forces laid siege to Jerusalem, David promised that the first to enter the city would receive the leadership of the armies of Israel and Judah, which had recently been joined; Joab won the prize.

When David wanted Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, destroyed in battle, it was Joab who carried his king's order to the front and who shared the dark secret that might easily have proven fatal to the reputation of the king. Later, it was Joab who worked out the initial reconciliation between David and Absalom, when Absalom was banished from the court. And again, it was Joab who led the forces of David against Absalom in the civil war. In fact, it was Joab who slew Absalom when no

one else dared to defy David, and who chastized David for his public display of mourning over Absalom.

At this juncture in David's life, the king made what seems to have been a very foolish mistake. In his attempt to pacify the defeated armies of Absalom and to show them that they were truly forgiven, he took away the leadership of the army from Joab, who had served him faithfully from the beginning, and offered it to Amasa, who had served as commander-in-chief of the enemy forces. The insult was too much, and shortly after this Joab slew Amasa and regained his former post.

The struggle between Joab and David lasted until after the death of David. Joab's last insult was to join in the movement to place Adonijah on the throne in preference to Solomon. David, when he lay upon his deathbed, gave charges to Solomon showing once more the all-too-human side of the aging king. He ordered the death of Joab. These are among the final instructions he gave to Solomon: "Moreover thou knowest also what Joab ... did to me, and what he did to the two captains of the hosts of Israel, ... whom he slew, and shed the blood of war in peace. ... Do therefore according to thy wisdom, and let not his hoar [gray] head go down to the grave in peace." (1 Kgs. 2:5-6.) Accordingly, Solomon had Joab slain.

Out of this whirling, churning torrent of a life came some of the most deeply sublime utterances in all Hebrew literature. The psalms formed the foundation of Jewish and Christian hymnology for many centuries. Even today such hymns as "The Lord Is My Shepherd" and "He That Hath Clean Hands and a Pure Heart" are favorites throughout the world. Amazingly, much of David's poetry is beautifully calm and subdued and is a great example of profundity couched in quiet simplicity.

Commentary on the psalms, like commentary on any great literature, borders on the periphery of presumption, since any great literature speaks adequately for itself. However, one might be forgiven for simply noting what appear to be some of the major recurring aspects of David's work.

Unfortunately, we are not even certain which psalms are really David's. For many years it was generally accepted that David wrote the first 72, but scholars today are of varying opinions concerning even this. One can say, however, with a degree of assurance that several of these psalms reflect attitudes akin to those demonstrated by David in the historical books dealing with his life. Yet even this may involve unsound assumptions because of the complex nature of David's character, and because he is not only complex, but changeable as well. He exemplifies some of the noblest qualities known to man and also some of the most base. At times his capacity for life seems almost unbelievable, when one considers the full spectrum of his experiences.

Some of the psalms reflect attitudes akin to those David demonstrated at the death of Absalom. One experiences with David the suffering of a soul torn by grief. At times one senses almost a paranoiac personality, as David cries out for protection and vengeance, calling upon God to smite and to destroy all who have wronged

him or opposed him, to demonstrate that his God does exist and that he is a God of might. Yet, in other moments the psalmist is extremely compassionate, exulting over God's mercy to him in the days of his own transgression. Occasionally David reaches the heights of exhilaration, with feelings akin to those he demonstrated when he danced before the ark of the covenant as it entered Jerusalem. His exclamations of praise seem unbounded as he struggles to give words to the emotions he feels in meditating upon the blessings of God.

Yet, through all of the psalms one theme is constant and dominant: the reliance of man upon God. This was one lesson David learned early upon the hills of Bethlehem. The Lord was his Shepherd, and having served part of his own life in the capacity of herdsman, David knew well the full implications of those words of the now famous Twenty-third Psalm.

Furthermore, David knew the Shepherd intimately. Knowingly or unknowingly he prophesied often of the deep traumas that Jesus would experience. For example, while hanging on the cross, the Master was to remind his disciples of the prophetic words of the Twenty-second Psalm with his anguished cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

David too knew loneliness and estrangement; he knew what it meant to be homeless, without friends; he knew what it meant to be betrayed by those closest to him; he knew what it meant to have his friends suffer. His psalms reflect this. He also was a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief. He, like Jesus after him, knew to an amazing degree the fulness of the dimensions of life. But through all this, David knew best that God knew best—and that the safest course in life is to throw oneself to a great degree upon the wisdom of God. This theme is dominant throughout the psalms. He knew as well as anyone what Christ meant when he told his own disciples ten centuries later, "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing." (John 15:5.) This knowledge underlies all of David's poetry—and all of his greatness.