

## Books of Samuel

### 5. The Character of David

The period between Saul driving David out of the royal court and Saul and Jonathan's deaths on the battlefield at the end of 1 Samuel is the least well known part of David's life and career. It is also the time when the characterization of David as a "man after God's own heart" is most challenging to maintain. Under the threat of Saul's repeated attempts to kill him, David flees to the wilderness of Judah, a geologically forbidding territory. The landscape ranges from brush-covered hills all the way down to the Dead Sea, inhospitable terrain from start to finish. This is the region to which those seeking to hide from the authorities, for various reasons, have often gravitated. This is where the rebels fled during the Jewish revolt against Rome, to Masada; where the self-proclaimed messiah Bar Kochba and his followers hid; where the Qumran community went to establish themselves in opposition to the priestly leadership in Jerusalem; where many monasteries have been built to find seclusion. We should thus not be surprised that when David arrives there, he surrounds himself with a group of unsavory characters: "everyone who was in straits and everyone who was in debt and everyone who was desperate" (1 Sam 22:2).

Although David and his men are portrayed as simply trying to survive in the wilderness, it is telling that none of the inhabitants of the scattered settlements in Judah were particularly enthusiastic about having him around. On multiple occasions, David arrives in a region only to have its inhabitants immediately inform Saul of David's whereabouts: "If your majesty has the desire to come down, come down, and it will be our task to deliver [David] into your majesty's hands" (1 Sam 23:20). These episodes seem to undermine to a certain extent the attempt of the biblical authors to convince us that all Israel loved David, to the point even of wanting him as

king; it seems that a good portion of Israel, even David's home territory of Judah, didn't want him even as a neighbor.

David and his men are the closest approximation we have in the Bible to a well-known ancient Near Eastern social group known as the *hapiru*. Throughout the ancient Near East in the second and first millennia BCE we have reports of this group, the membership in which can be tricky to pin down. *Hapiru* seems to have been a word not for an ethnic collective, but rather for bands of social outcasts that organized themselves militarily. The *hapiru* would occasionally raid towns and cities, and sometimes were hired as mercenaries. They were almost invariably looked down on, in large part probably because they had no established homeland, or were not welcome in what had once been their native regions. This description fits David and his men very well. It should be noted that many scholars have tried to make an etymological connection between *hapiru* and "Hebrew," raising the possibility that the marker "Hebrew" speaks to the semi-nomadic origins of the Israelites. Although this identification is often challenged, it is noteworthy that even in the Bible the term "Hebrew" is almost always a label used by foreigners of Israel, rather than by Israel of itself.

The story that best exemplifies this role for David and his band of ne'er-do-wells is 1 Samuel 25, the encounter with Nabal and Abigail. Nabal, we are told, is an immensely wealthy man. David sends some of his men with a message: "Your shepherds have been with us; we did not harm them, and nothing of theirs has gone missing...please give your servants and your son David whatever you can" (1 Sam 25:7–8). This is, not to put too fine a point on it, a protection racket worthy of any modern mafia. Nabal, to his credit (though also to his misfortune), declines, insulting David as a runaway slave. David's response is equally recognizable as that of a mob boss: "David said to his men, 'Gird on your swords'" (25:13). And David, with four hundred

armed men, approach Nabal's home, intending, even by David's own admission, to kill Nabal and all his men. Regardless of how positively we may view David, and regardless of how desperate he and his men may be imagined to have been, this is hardly the behavior of a "man after God's own heart."

David, however, is spared from killing Nabal by the intervention of Abigail, Nabal's wife, who intercepts David before he reaches the house and provides him with the goods he had requested. More than that, though: she also seems to be totally cognizant of David's future kingship: "When the Lord has accomplished for my lord all the good he has promised you, and has appointed you ruler of Israel..." (25:30). This appears to be a reference to Samuel's anointing of David back in chapter 16, but this is narratively impossible: no one outside of David's immediate family, and Samuel, knows that the anointing took place, or of the divine promise that David would be king. (It is for this reason that in Jewish tradition Abigail is counted among the biblical prophetesses of Israel.) The story ends with a remarkable moment of *deus ex machina*: although David praises Abigail "for restraining me from seeking redress in blood by my own hands" (25:33), Nabal still dies: "About ten days later the Lord struck Nabal and he died" (25:38). This pleases David: "Praised be the Lord who championed my cause against the insults of Nabal and held back his servant from wrongdoing; the Lord has brought Nabal's wrongdoing down on his own head" (25:39). As a denouement, Abigail, upon the death of Nabal, agrees to become David's wife, and leaves her home to accompany him in the wilderness.

This story is unusual for several reasons. Foremost, perhaps, is the direct divine intervention into the narrative, which is almost unique in the David story. Abigail's apparent knowledge of David's anointing is equally interesting. Both contribute to the aim of the biblical authors here: to remind us that David is the hero (and Nabal the enemy); and that despite his

ostensible inclinations, David was not at all responsible for the death of Nabal—even though, at the end of the story, Nabal is dead; and David is walking away with all of Nabal’s possessions including Abigail.

In 1 Samuel 24 and 26 we find two parallel stories, so close as to really be considered doublets. These are the stories of David coming upon Saul when the king is at a moment of vulnerability, when David, given the chance to kill the king and be rid of the pursuit once and for all, declines to do so, instead taking something from Saul—a piece of his cloak, his spear—as proof of his noble intentions. The purpose of these stories is abundantly clear: to ensure that Saul, and perhaps even more so the reader, knows without a doubt that David has no interest in regicide. “The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my lord—the Lord’s anointed—that I should raise my hand against him; for he is the Lord’s anointed” (24:6). “The Lord forbid that I should lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed!” (26:11).

It should be remembered that the Bible is not an eyewitness real-time report. When these stories were written, David had become king, and Saul had died. The narratives clearly recognize this eventuality, even having David allude to it in advance: “May the Lord judge between you and me! May he take vengeance upon you for me, but my hand will never touch you” (24:12). “As the Lord lives, the Lord himself will strike him down, or his time will come and he will die, or he will go down to battle and perish” (26:10). The biblical authors seem to be responding again here to what may well have been a popular perception of how Saul died—that is, at the hands of David, who, after all, became king in his place. We have here two stories that stress, to the point of redundancy, that David did not want to kill Saul—and that when Saul died, it would be by God’s hands, not by David’s. In a sense, the authors’ stress on this point is what drives the perceptive reader to wonder whether there might not be some truth to the perception that David

was, at least partially, responsible for Saul's death. At the very least, the way that the story is told suggests that there were some contemporaries of David or of the authors, who thought that to be the case.

Perhaps the most striking and unexpected moment of David's time in the wilderness comes in 1 Samuel 27, when, faced with the constant pursuits of Saul, David and his men decide that their best plan of action is to offer themselves as vassal mercenaries of Israel's greatest enemy: the Philistines. From almost any perspective, this is borderline unthinkable. Since the time of the judges, the Philistines had been a constant threat to the very existence of Israel. Saul was recognized as king over Israel almost entirely because he was able to fight off the Philistine advances and protect Israel's territory. David himself became famous by defeating the Philistines in the battle against Goliath. And yet here is Israel's greatest hero, going over to the enemy side and offering his services, which are happily accepted by King Achish of Gath (the very hometown of Goliath).

In scholarship on the historical Jesus, scholars developed certain criteria for which parts of the story could be taken as containing at least some historical veracity. One of those is known as the "criterion of embarrassment": the idea being that if someone were to invent the story from whole cloth, they never would have included an episode that was so embarrassing to the protagonist. If the story has the main character doing something that seems at odds with what we might expect from a national hero, then it is likely that there is a grain of truth in it. David working for the Philistines—not just for a few days, but for nearly a year and a half—is just such an episode. Many scholars maintain that there was no historical David, that he was merely an invention of a later Israelite community, a purely fictional founding figure. This aspect of his story, however, stands as strong evidence to the contrary. Who, inventing a founding hero from

scratch, would have him go work for Israel's arch-enemy? We can be almost certain that David did in fact spend time among the Philistines.

It was, in fact, while David was in the employ of the Philistines that Saul and Jonathan were killed in battle against those selfsame Philistines. The Bible goes to great lengths to show that despite being a Philistine vassal David was not anywhere near the battlefield when Saul and Jonathan fell. And yet it is hard to believe that he had no part in their deaths—especially because days later Saul's crown was, literally, in David's hands.

After Saul's death, the argument for David's lack of ambition for the throne evaporates from the narrative. Starting at the beginning of 2 Samuel, David is nothing but ambition: having himself crowned as king of Judah, then waging a war of aggression against the remnants of Saul's kingdom in the north, held by Saul's general Abner and Saul's son Ishboshet, and eventually becoming king over all Israel, north and south. At almost every step along the way, people around David—Saul, Jonathan, Abner, and Ishboshet, not to mention Nabal—die violently, always to David's clear material benefit. Yet in every instance, David is narratively absolved of the deaths. Sometimes this absolution is a bit heavy-handed, especially in the case of Abner. In 2 Samuel 3, Abner comes to David to make peace. Upon the conclusion of their conversation, we are told, "David dismissed Abner, who went away unharmed" (2 Sam 3:21). The next verse reminds us that "Abner was no longer with David in Hebron, for he had been dismissed and had gone away unharmed" (3:22). The next verse has Joab, David's general, arriving to discover "that Abner son of Ner had come to the king, had been dismissed by him, and had gone away unharmed" (3:23). When Abner is killed by Joab, therefore, we can be sure that David had nothing to do with it. And if we weren't sure already, the biblical authors go on to have David say it: "Both I and my kingdom are forever innocent before the Lord of shedding the

blood of Abner son of Ner. May the guilt fall upon the head of Joab” (3:28–29). And if that weren’t enough, the authors say it again: “That day all the troops and all Israel knew that it was not by the king’s will that Abner son of Ner was killed” (3:37). This chapter is the ultimate example of the biblical authors protesting too much. By the time they have finished repeating themselves, the savvy reader can be fairly certain that David had everything to do with Abner’s death, even if he didn’t wield the sword himself.

Once he has gained the throne, the next few chapters of David’s story in 2 Samuel concentrate (except for 2 Samuel 7 dealt with in the next session) on David’s accomplishments as king: his conquest of Jerusalem and establishment of the City of David, the installation of the Ark of the Covenant there, and David’s successes in war against Israel’s neighbors by which the borders of Israel were expanded. For the most part, these chapters are narrated in a relatively straightforward manner, and are not among the most often read or well-loved of the David saga. Yet it is in these chapters, with these acts, that David cemented his legacy in history. The combination of Judah and Israel into a single nation, though it lasted only two generations before reverting to its traditional split, created an idea of Israel that lasted up to the present. Whenever we think of Israel as it is currently shaped, we are thinking of the Israel that David created. Indeed, whenever the Bible refers to the twelve tribes of Israel or to any combination of Judah with the other tribes that is a reflex of David’s kingdom and could not have been even conceived of before David. When we think of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, as the world’s holiest city, that too is David’s doing. These royal accomplishments are what sealed David as the founder of Israel in so many respects.

It is worth asking, then, as we consider David’s character: to what extent is our appreciation of David contingent not on what he did, but on how he went about it? If we suspect

that David may not have been a “man after God’s own heart,” does that negate what he actually accomplished for Israel, for history, for us?

*Questions for reflection:*

To what extent is David’s character explained by situating him in the context of the real-world ancient Near East?

How important is it to understand the bias of the biblical authors, beyond the simple retelling of the story, in reading the Bible, here and everywhere?

What aspect of David’s life is most important? What he accomplished, or who he was as a person? How is the answer to this related to the Christian tradition that David was an ancestor of and model for Jesus?

***Further reading:***

McCarter, *I Samuel*, 354–444

McCarter, *II Samuel*, 55–276

McKenzie, *King David*, 89–152