

I

DAVID AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY



He stood out among the masses crowded near the Dung Gate at the south end of the Old City of Jerusalem, long blond hair and deep blue eyes, dressed in a long flowing white gown with a crown on his head and a harp in his arms. His routine was to play a few songs and then invite tourists on a guided visit of the temple mount and the Jewish quarter. This modern-day “King David” was relying on the Western image of this ancient king to try to make a living in a city filled with pilgrims. This image was one that I knew well, drawn from the Sunday school pictures and illustrated Bibles of my childhood.

At the same time at an archaeological dig in the northern part of Israel, at Tel Dan, in ancient times the northernmost city of the tribes of Israel, an astonishing find was announced to the media. Archaeologists had discovered a mid-ninth century BC stele, that is, a stone monument inscribed with letters. The letters comprised thirteen lines written in the Aramaic language, and near the center of the inscription was the phrase “house of David.” The text chronicled events strikingly similar to the massacre of Joram and Ahaziah in 2 Kings 9. The ancient letters identified Ahaziah

as a king from the house or dynasty of David. The inscription created a sensation because it was the oldest archaeological evidence for the existence of a dynasty that originated in a figure named David.¹

These two events from modern-day Israel remind us at the outset of at least two images of David that exist in our world today. There is the contemporary image of David, one that has been forged through millennia of Jewish and Christian history, through ancient, medieval, and modern art, and is now painted in our collective mind's eye. At the same time there is a historical image of David, one that has been reconstructed from archaeological evidence and ancient Near Eastern texts and sifted through the scientific perspective of modern scholars. These two images, contemporary and historical, rarely coincide.

There is, however, another image of David, one that sometimes overlaps with one or the other of these two images. It is the David of the canon, that is, the literary-theological image of David in the biblical texts. Certainly there are some elements of this image of David that have informed the contemporary image of David, even if many aspects of the latter reflect inappropriate modern impositions. Certainly the canonical David is connected to the historical David, even if it is clear that there was much more to the David of history than is now recorded in the Scriptures. The goal of this book, however, is to offer you a theological portrait of the David of the Bible, rooted in his historical context and relevant to our contemporary context, expressed as a theological witness to God and his redemptive purposes in our world.

There are some who would expect and appreciate a book defending the historical David against the onslaught of recent minimalist approaches according to which David is but a literary myth.² But, although a legitimate exercise, this will not be the focus of this book.³ There are others who are looking for ready-made sermons that provide quick and easy

access to David for popular consumption. Although this book will show the way the canonical presentation of David can and does shape contemporary life, this will be based on a patient encounter with the biblical text which I hope will lay a foundation for a series of sermons or Bible studies.

DAVID AND NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

Our journey through the Old Testament theological theme of David will begin in what for many is an unlikely place: the New Testament. By doing this we hope to provide a theological map to guide Christian readers to the scenic vistas of Old Testament theology.

There is little question that King David receives considerable attention in the pages of the New Testament. He is mentioned as a towering past figure in the great redemptive story of Israel (Matt. 1:6, 17; 12:3; 22:43, 45; Mark 2:25; 12:36–37; Acts 7:45; 13:22; Heb. 11:32). As such a past figure he is a source of authority, whether through revelation (Mark 12:36; Acts 1:16; 2:29–30; 4:25) or through example (Luke 6:3–5; Heb. 11:32). He also is identified clearly as the source of the royal line and messianic hope for Israel in the time of Jesus (Matt. 22:42; Mark 11:10; 12:35), a hope that Christ's followers identified with Jesus who was called the son of David (Matt. 1:1, 20; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30–31; 21:9, 15; Mark 10:47–48; Luke 1:27). This preliminary evidence shows how important David was to the early Christian community. His words and example were key to the early Christian community, but in what ways were his words and example applied?

First of all, Christ is viewed as the son of David, the one who fulfilled the messianic hope, who reestablished the Davidic line. This fact is clear from the opening passage in the present form of the New Testament as Matthew 1 places the accent on Jesus' Davidic roots as well as his

birth in Bethlehem, the home village of David. Such an emphasis on Jesus' Davidic roots can be seen in Romans 1:3 ("who as to his human flesh was born a descendent of David") and Hebrews 1:5 (cf. 1:8–13). Hebrews 1:5 draws heavily on Psalm 2, a psalm which trumpets the ascension of the Davidic king to the throne, and 2 Samuel 7, a passage which expresses the covenantal agreement between Yahweh and the Davidic house. This initial connection, that is, between Jesus Christ and David is obvious to most, but is easy to take for granted. It is important to realize that our appropriation of the Davidic story is possible only through and because of Christ's foundational link to David.

The second connection, however, is often overlooked by Christians. In 2 Corinthians 6:18, the apostle Paul clearly alludes to the same passage in 2 Samuel 7 that we have already seen is used elsewhere to forge a link between Jesus and David. However, in this instance there is a slight change. Whereas in 2 Samuel 7:14, the reference is "I will be his father, and he will be my son," in 2 Corinthians 6:18 Paul modifies this to "I will be a father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters." Here the apostle does two things. First, he makes the original Davidic covenantal promise plural ("sons"), indicating that he is speaking about a community. Second, he includes both male and female ("sons and daughters"), a significant declaration in an ancient patriarchal age. By doing this he is revealing that the Davidic covenant now rests upon the community of Christ as a whole, which now functions in the line of David as vice-regents of God on earth.

This is very important to our appropriation of the image and tradition of David in the Old Testament. As we encounter David in the Old Testament we need to see him as a type of the coming Messiah; the role he fills within Israel reveals the role that his messianic descendant would fulfill. On one level this is truly redemptive-historical, that is, David's role can be fulfilled only by the Christ in a

unique and singular way. However, the New Testament also suggests that in and through this Christ we as a community enter into the Davidic covenant and in some way also fulfill the function of David.

The reason I want to share this at the outset of the book is to provide you with the theological framework to appropriate the Davidic image and tradition in the Old Testament for your lives as Christians. As we encounter the various aspects of this tradition, you need to first consider how this anticipates and is fulfilled in Christ. But after doing this you are compelled by the New Testament witness to reflect on the way in which the various aspects can become a reality for us who share the name Christian: that is, Messiah-ones.

These two hermeneutical movements, one redemptive-historical and the other redemptive-ethical, are echoed in the apostle Paul's encouragement to young Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:14–17 to embrace the Old Testament as normative Scripture for his Christian life and ministry. Old Testament texts are, according to Paul, “holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus,” that is, they function as witness to the grand story of redemption that culminates in and through Jesus Christ, the son of David. In addition, Paul continues, these same texts (“All Scripture”) which are “God-breathed” are “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (TNIV), that is, they function as witness to God's grand ethic of redemption which is expressed in and through the body of Christ (the church) animated by the Spirit of Christ.

Notice how the redemptive story and ethic are drawn from “Scripture,” a translation of the Greek word *graphē* which refers to the written texts of the Old Testament canon. This is key to our present theological enterprise. It is not the history reconstructed from these texts (and other sources) nor is it depictions evident in contemporary

expressions from which we take our lead in this study. Rather, it is the portrait of David preserved within the canonical witness that guides our theological reflection. This authoritative witness compels us to not merely reflect, but to respond in word and deed to the David of Scripture.

DAVID AND OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

Now that we have laid a foundation for our appropriation of the image of David in light of the New Testament, there is a need also to consider a foundational interpretive issue in Old Testament theology. One of the key questions that dogs the presentation of David in the Old Testament is whether kingship as an institution was a divinely initiated or divinely permitted office for Israel.⁴ To this question we now turn.

Kingship after the Israelites' Hearts

Although it is not the earliest mention of kingship in the Old Testament, 1 Samuel 8 is probably the first passage to which people turn when discussing the theme of kingship. This chapter presents a scene from late in the career of the great leader Samuel. When the people approached Samuel requesting a king to lead them, the old leader was deeply disturbed and so inquired of the Lord to discern his will. The answer from God was troubling: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you" (1 Sam. 8:7–8).

At first, it appears from Samuel's concern and the Lord's response that he did not regard kingship as a positive development for Israel. This suggests that when kingship became a legitimate office within Israel, it had more to do with God's permissive will than with his intentional

will (he permits it, but it was not his intention). However, a closer look at the Israelites' request as well as God's response brings this preliminary conclusion into question.

In their initial request to Samuel the people request a king "such as all the other nations have" (1 Sam. 8:5). This is expanded later in the scene as they cry: "We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles" (1 Sam. 8:19–20).

The circumstances of this request are described more fully in Samuel's farewell speech in 1 Samuel 12:12 as Samuel reminds them: "But when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites was moving against you, you said to me, 'No, we want a king to rule over us'—even though the LORD your God was your king."

These statements by the people and prophet reveal the perception of kingship in the minds of the people. Human kingship was linked to war. Tired of their vulnerability among the nations, the people wanted to experience the military security that a human king with his standing army could bring. This helps clarify God's warning to the people in 1 Samuel 8:10–18. God warns them that the kind of king they are requesting would take their children and resources in order to sustain his royal court and army.

A king in line with the wishes of the Israelites was a military leader who would offer them peace and security, and soon God would provide them with such a leader in Saul, son of Kish. He was a towering physical specimen: "an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites—a head taller than any of the others" (1 Sam. 9:2), well-suited to the military role expected by the Israelites.

God's Kingship

God's offense at the Israelites' request for a military king can only be understood in light of the greatest salvation event in Israel's history. In Exodus 12–14 the Lord delivers

his people from Egypt by parting the waters of the sea and then defeats their enemy by returning the waters to their normal course. This momentous victory is celebrated in Exodus 15 in the ancient song of praise sung by Moses and the Israelites (Ex. 15:1–18).

The song begins by accentuating the battle prowess of the Lord God, exalting him as the “warrior” who “has hurled into the sea” Pharaoh and his men. The language is that of a military victory with reference to “horse,” “rider,” “chariots,” “army,” and “officers.” The ending of the song, however, identifies the implications of this great victory in war as the celebrants cry: “the LORD will reign for ever and ever.” This battle is a declaration to all peoples, whether Egypt whence they have come or Canaan to which they are going (Edom, Moab, Canaan, v. 15) that the Lord is King of kings, Lord of lords, and that there is none among the gods like Yahweh. The passage looks to the day when God will take up his residence in his divine palace, the temple in Jerusalem (15:13, 17) from where Yahweh will reign forever. Therefore, this great victory in battle is foundational to God’s claim of kingship.

God’s kingship over Israel as a nation was demonstrated through his defeat of Egypt and defense of Israel at the sea. In this event Israel did not have to raise a spear or sword; God was their warrior. This was to be a defining moment for Israel: God was their king because God was their warrior who would fight for them. Even when the Israelites were instructed to participate in war, God was careful to remind them that victory was accomplished only through reliance upon God their warrior. In Exodus 17:8–16 it is Moses’ reliance upon God on the hill above the battle scene that secures victory. The account in Exodus 17 makes it clear that Joshua must know the divine source of this victory; thus the Lord tells Moses: “Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of

Amalek from under heaven” (17:14). This is an important truth for Joshua to know, since he would be the one who would lead Israel in the conquest of the Promised Land.

Therefore, in light of the fact that military protection was the key prerogative of kingship within Israel, one can understand why kingship and battle were linked in the minds of the Israelites and why their request was interpreted as a rejection of God’s kingship in the heavenly realms. Nevertheless, does this mean that kingship per se was unacceptable to God?

Expectation of Kingship

To answer this we need to look further afield. The biblical witness does not present kingship as a late-breaking emphasis in the twilight years of Samuel’s ministry. According to Genesis 17 the covenant ceremony between God and Abraham included the promise that “kings will come from you” (17:6). This promise is made more specific later in Genesis as Jacob blesses his sons, for as he addresses Judah, the old man declares: “the scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his” (Gen. 49:10). Using images well known from Egyptian Pharaohs (scepter/staff), the patriarch presages that a king would come forth from the tribe of Judah and that this king would rule not only over the nations, but also over “your father’s sons” (Gen. 49:8).

The book of Deuteronomy depicts the final speech of Moses to a people poised to conquer the land of Canaan. The role of a king presupposed by this scene is true not only on the historical level, but also on the literary level as it represents the final installment of the Torah, but also the introduction to the story of Israel that stretches from Joshua through 2 Kings and is often called the “Deuteronomic History,” the story of Israel described through the lens of Deuteronomy. The book of Deuteronomy itself assumes

the appointment of a king once the people had settled in the land (Deut. 17:14–20). This future appointment is expressed in ways that reveal their affinity with the stories related in Samuel, highlighting the people's request for a king. The reference to the appointment of the king here is depicted in descriptive rather than prescriptive terms, that is, God speaks of the time when the people would ask for a king and offers his guidance on how the king should act, but does not say whether kingship is his preferred *modus operandi*.

This, however, becomes clearer in the book of Judges. At the core of this fascinating book is the account of a series of twelve judges whom God raised up in the years between the death of Joshua and the birth of Samuel. Significant emphasis is placed on six of these judges (Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson),⁵ while six are mentioned only in passing (Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon). These judges were empowered by the "spirit of the Lord" (e.g., Jephthah, 11:29) and accomplished mighty deeds.

These stories press home two key principles. First, the people of God are prone to idolatry and sin as can be seen in the repeating cycle of sin (peace-disobedience-discipline-cry-salvation-peace; see, e.g., Judg. 2:10–23). Second, God must raise up leadership on a regular basis to rescue his people. The first three major accounts of these judges (Othniel, Ehud, Deborah) are largely positive. But as the narrative progresses, the leaders commit grave errors of judgment: Gideon is mighty, but after obediently destroying the Asherah pole in his hometown and refusing Israel's desire for military kingship ("The LORD will rule over you," 8:22–23), he makes a trap for his own people with his ephod. Abimelech tries to become king and it ends in disaster (Judg. 9). Jephthah spoils his story by sacrificing his daughter to the Lord (Judg. 10:6–12:7). Finally, Samson, who begins with such promise, represents the greatest

tragedy of the entire series of judges (Judg. 13–16). Thus these stories of judges depict a rebellious people, but also an inconsistent leadership structure.

Although Samson is the final judge in the book, his story is not the conclusion to the book. Rather there are five more chapters, and in these chapters we are given some of the most shocking stories in the Old Testament. In chapters 17–18 we are told the story of Micah's idols, and in chapters 19–21, the story of the rape and murder of the Levite's concubine and near demise of the tribe of Benjamin. While in Judges 2–16 there is little focus on the tribal identity of the various characters and events, in chapters 17–21 tribal identity is emphasized. These chapters present a picture of the tribes of Israel in disunity, destroying one another.

At the beginning and ending of this section of the book is found what is probably the most famous phrase from the book: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (17:6 TNIV; 21:25; cf. 18:1; 19:1). Many consider the clause "everyone did as they saw fit" as a picture of moral anarchy and relativism: all did as they saw fit, creating standards for themselves and rejecting God's Torah standards. The only other place in the Bible that this phrase appears is in Deuteronomy 12. After reviewing the various ways that the Canaanites worshiped their gods in the land, the people are commanded:

You must not worship the LORD your God in their way. But you are to seek the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name [*shem*] there [*sham*] for his dwelling. To that place [*sham*] you must go; there [*sham*] bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. There [*sham*], in the presence of the LORD

your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD your God has blessed you.

You are not to do as we do here today, everyone doing as they see fit, since you have not yet reached the resting place and the inheritance the LORD your God is giving you. But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety. Then to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name [*shem*]*—there* [*sham*, 2x] you are to bring everything I command you: your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, and all the choice possessions you have vowed to the LORD. And there rejoice before the LORD your God—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites from your towns who have no allotment or inheritance of their own. Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings anywhere you please. Offer them only at the place the LORD will choose in one of your tribes, and there [*sham*] observe everything I command you. (Deut. 12:4–14 TNIV)

This speech refers to the worship of the people and the call of God to centralize their worship in one place once they enter the land. But in Judges all did as they saw fit, continuing the practice in the wilderness which left them vulnerable to the idolatrous practices of the Canaanites who preceded them and were judged. The Israelites were worshiping God in their own ways, at their own places. But God had instructed them to fix a central place for their worship.

The clause “everyone did as they saw fit” is linked to another key clause in Judges: “in those days Israel had no

king.” Some have suggested that the reference here is to God’s kingship, that is, “in those days Israel did not submit to God as their king.” However, several lines of evidence suggest that the narrator is referring to a human king and that this king was none other than David and his dynasty in contrast to Saul.

First of all, the issue of worship in the story of Micah (chs. 17–18) is related to the establishment of the cult center of the Northern Kingdom which split away from the southern Davidic kingdom (18:28–31). Second, the issue of injustice in the story of Benjamin’s demise (chs. 19–21) is related not only to the tribe of Benjamin (which was the tribe of Saul), but to the town of Gibeah (the precise village from which Saul came). Third, in both of these stories the other key characters involve the tribes of Ephraim and the clan of Bethlehem in Judah (Micah was from Ephraim and hires a young Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, a Levite from Ephraim took a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah and that Bethlehemite woman is killed). Fourth, clearly Saul’s family power base was in Benjamin and then extended beyond this to the northern tribes, the very negative characters in these two stories at the end of Judges. Fifth, when the tribes of Israel inquire of God in Judges 20:18 as to who should go up first to fight against Benjamin, the answer is that Judah should go up first, identifying Judah as the leadership tribe for Israel. This identification of Judah as the leader of Israel is also seen in Judges 1:1–21; as the tribes consider fighting against an enemy after the death of Joshua, Judah is identified as the tribe which would initiate the battle.⁶

Given the evidence from the central “judges” section of this book, evidence that shows the ineffectiveness of leadership through judges, together with the evidence from the final chapters (16–21), the book appears to be encouraging a form of kingship that facilitates the

command of Moses in Deuteronomy 12. Negative depictions of the tribe of Benjamin and in particular the clan of Gibeah, and positive depictions of the tribe of Judah and the victimization of Bethlehemites, suggest that David is in view as the king who would accomplish unification of the tribes.

Some might suggest that kingship, however, does not receive positive exposure in the “judges” section of the book. The people approach Gideon to establish a dynasty (Judg. 8:22–23) and are rebuffed, for “the LORD will rule over you.” The Abimelech story which follows Gideon’s death shows the disaster of an experiment in kingship. However, a closer look reveals that the people’s request for a king in Judges 8:22 echoes the same problem found in Israel’s request for a king in 1 Samuel: “because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian.” Their motivation for kingship was to take away from the Lord his divine prerogatives. The story of Abimelech does not necessarily disqualify kingship, but rather disqualifies kingship gained and retained in the wrong way (that is, through human initiative and shedding of blood).

Thus the book of Judges longs for a king from the tribe of Judah who would unify and lead Israel. Until that happened the kinds of stories found in Judges would endure, stories of idolatry, disunity, and liaisons with the Canaanites.

The books of Samuel and Kings catalogue the failures of the Davidic kings, even if several figures do fulfill the calling of sustaining worship and purity (esp. Hezekiah, 2 Kings 18–20, and Josiah, 2 Kings 22–23). In the end, however, the royal house fails and Judah is destroyed and many of its people exiled. The writer of Kings, however, does not even then disqualify the Davidic dynasty, but ends his book with the account of Jehoiachin’s release from prison in Babylon (2 Kings 25:27–30), a sign of hope for the renewal of the Davidic line to its rightful place.

The evidence that we have highlighted in the Torah and the Former Prophets (Genesis–2 Kings) reveals that there were an expectation and justification for some form of royal rule in Israel, and that such was not an afterthought or even an accommodation to human sinfulness. This fixation with kingship and the Davidic dynasty will be affirmed in our final chapter (“David and Messiah”) as we look at the witness of the Latter Prophets (Isaiah–Malachi). Therefore, God’s problem with kingship in 1 Samuel is not with the royal office per se, but rather with the Israelite conception of kingship, especially their intention to switch their reliance and allegiance from divine to human king.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. As you begin this study reflect honestly on the image of David that is present in your mind. Ask a close friend or family member to do the same and discuss the source of your image.
2. Describe how you think Christians should approach and appropriate the Old Testament. Is it Christian Scripture? Is it foundational to Christian Scripture? Does it have enduring relevance to us today? Why?
3. What is the relationship between history and theology? Is it important that David lived in historical time and space? Why?
4. We have distinguished between “redemptive-historical” and “redemptive-ethical” in this chapter. Can you distinguish between these two ways in which the Old Testament is related to us as Christians? Give examples of truth in the Old Testament that is one or the other.
5. Is it essential that kingship be the intentional design of God? Why?

6. For God to be king meant that Israel would have to be passive, entrusting themselves into the hands of their Divine Warrior. What challenges do you face in which you need to entrust yourself into the hands of God?

