

The life of King David

The question may be posed – “Do we, in the life of King David, see a life of obedience to God?”

I think the answer – to a large extent depends on when one asks the question.

If we had lived at the time of King David or Solomon would our answer have been the same as it might have been had we lived at the time of the Exile?

Suppose we had lived at the time of Jesus would that have influenced our judgement?

Indeed how might we answer the question today?

Structure of the material on King David

I intend to move on from the time when David was an outlaw and to concentrate on material found in 2 Samuel and the beginning of 1 Kings.

The work of Leonhard Rost in 1926 is fundamental to an understanding of this book. Rost, who was professor of Theology in Berlin, suggested that chapters 9-20 of 2 Samuel and chapters 1 and 2 of 1 Kings should be seen as a single work which he called The Succession History. The goal of that narrative was to show how Solomon became king.

Despite the adultery of David with Bathsheba

And despite the revolt by Absalom

It was the author's intention to show the overall purposes of God in bringing Solomon to the throne of a united Israel.

To this Rost wanted to add chapter 6 – the bringing of the Ark to Jerusalem.

In general terms the thesis was rubber stamped by Professor Martin Noth in his book *The Deuteronomic History* and Gerhard von Rad described it as “an almost entirely flawless literary unity.” *Old Testament Theology vol1 p113*

Peter Ackroyd (*The Succession Narrative – so called p388ff*) was less convinced, pointing out that not everything in the chapters was about the succession and indeed some material appeared to be anti-Solomonic

Whybray and Hermisson saw the work as a piece of literature written during the reign of King Solomon, when they believed there was an upsurge of interest in didactic wisdom. So the whole thing is about moral evaluation.

Whybray had another suggestion and that was that 2 Samuel 9-20 and 1 Kings 1-2 could be compared with what is called *konigsnovelle* that is Egyptian wisdom writing – along the lines of the *Tale of Sinhue* and the *Instructions of Amenemope*.

I think David Gunn's book on *The Story of David* is pretty good. He backs the idea that it is a traditional story. It is full of well-known motifs. There's crime and punishment – David's sin, goodies and badies - counsellors Hushai and Ahithophel and soldiers Ittai the Gittite and Joab. Women and spies...the letter that carries death. There is a tremendous accumulation of these traditional motifs and the whole composition if not orally told is but one step from it – not unlike the great sagas and legends.

What is less clear is where the surrounding chapters fit.

I don't have a problem with 1-4 in roughly the order written
5, 6 and 7 seem quite logical.

The position of chapter 8 I think is problematic

Chapter 21 and 24 I feel ought to be part of the early stories after David's capture of Jerusalem.

Chapter 22 has great links with Psalm material and could be from anywhere in his reign. I am not sure the context is original

Chapter 23:1-7 seem to belong to the end of David's life.

My hunch is that eventually the idea of a single narrative called the Succession History will fail. I see two problems with it. The first is the confusion about where it begins and the second is that there seems a wide narrative gap between the end of the revolt of Sheba with a reasonably alert and agile King David and the stories in 1 Kings where the king is depicted as a very old man and clearly dying.

Even so I note that Bill Arnold in his brilliant introduction to the Old Testament – published in 2014 believes that “the Succession Narrative continues to be one of the most logical explanations” for the material. *Bill Arnold Introduction to the Old Testament p216*

David and Bathsheba 2 Samuel 11-12

David's army was at war with the Ammonites. He was no longer with his troops but remained behind in Jerusalem. One nice bright sunny day he was walking on the roof of his house and he spied below him a gorgeous young lady probably bathing herself after her menstrual period. She was the wife of a man called Uriah one of the mercenaries attached to David's army. Uriah was away at the battle front fighting the Ammonites Nevertheless David invited the young lady, named Bathsheba, over to his place and the next thing we know she sent a message to the king to inform him that she was pregnant and that he was the father.

David hit on a plan – if he could get Uriah home very quickly and allow him to visit his home for a night or two with his wife, maybe the child might be passed off as Uriah's.

The first part of David's plan went quite well; Uriah came back to Jerusalem and he was questioned about the battle by the king. At the end of the day, David suggested that Uriah should nip off home for an evening with his wife.

There were quite strict rules according to the book of Deuteronomy (23:10-14) about purity of those engaged in holy war and Uriah declined the temptation to spend the night with his wife. David tried again the following day. He got Uriah drunk, but the soldier remained steadfast in his beliefs and slept in the servant's quarters.

So David sent Uriah back to the front with a letter for Joab, which instructed his commander to make sure that Uriah was killed in action.

Joab, who was something of a rotter anyway, implemented King David's instructions and Uriah was indeed killed in action

This left the way open for David to welcome Bathsheba into his house, once the official period of mourning was over and she indeed gave birth to the child.

Enter the prophet Nathan at the beginning of chapter 12.

He told a delightful parable – which purported to be a case study about a rich man and a poor man

“There were two men in one city, one rich and the other poor. ² The rich *man* had exceedingly many flocks and herds. ³ But the poor *man* had nothing, except one little ewe lamb which he had bought and nourished; and it grew up together with him and with his children. It ate of his own food and drank from his own cup and lay in his bosom; and it was like a daughter to

him. ⁴ And a traveller came to the rich man, who refused to take from his own flock and from his own herd to prepare one for the wayfaring man who had come to him; but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him."

⁵ So David's anger was greatly aroused against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this shall surely die! ⁶ And he shall restore fourfold for the lamb, because he did this thing and because he had no pity."

⁷ Then Nathan said to David, "You *are* the man!"

You are the king – you have wives and yet you stole the wife of Uriah the Hittite and then you had him killed.

David learnt that he would suffer public humiliation

There would always be tension and fierce rivalry in his own family

Nevertheless he (David) would not die – for the Lord had put away his sin;

But the child will die.

Where does that leave us over the question of obedience?

Clearly this is not good.

Adultery is a sin condemned in the ten commandments, where it is placed between the actions of murder and stealing – that is acts which injure one's neighbour. Leviticus 18:20 however adds a religious consideration that adultery is considered as a sin against God. If a man commits adultery with a married woman, both partners of the crime are put to death Lev 20:10 and Deut 22:22.

I think David must have felt that he had been dealt with in quite a lenient way.

What I always find surprising is the next part where the child fell sick.

David, it is said, pleaded with God, fasted and lay all night on the ground. Those in attendance had tried to get David to eat, but to no avail and when on the 7th day, they could see that the child was dead they were afraid to tell the king. Eventually David perceived this was the case and he got up, washed his face and went to eat food.

The episode concludes with Bathsheba – becoming completely part of the king's household conceiving once more and producing a son – who this time lived and was named Solomon.

There is a sense in which we seem to have moved away from the idea of a king as a servant of God and a servant of the people – a holy office.

The warnings of the prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 8 came true. David was behaving in a way which was similar to other kings of the nations.

Samuel warned the king will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields etc.

Absalom and the question of conflict 15-19

This I think is a much more complex question.

Essentially what happened here was that David's son Absalom led a revolt – backed it is true to say by tribes from the northern part of the kingdom. He advanced on Jerusalem and David with his entourage had to quit the city, up over the Mount of Olives and away to the river Jordan and they camped just beyond the Jordan.

Meanwhile Absalom took Jerusalem and the king's palace and then had to decide what to do next.

Ill-advisedly he rejected the advice of his supporter Ahithophel who counselled – leave Jerusalem and attack David while he and his supporters are in confusion. Instead Absalom accepted the suggestion of Hushai (called David's Friend...just in case the reader is confused) who said "No wait until you have had a chance to gather together an army from all over Israel – then go and get King David."

The narrator at this point subtly advised the reader that the latter is not great advice for Absalom but would give king David just enough space to gather himself.

Eventually there was a battle which Absalom's forces lost and Absalom himself was killed – quite deliberately killed - against King David's wishes.

So then of course Joab was in the dog house because he himself had killed Absalom. After a bit of a scene between the two of them, everyone returned to Jerusalem.

What are the issues?

1. David's failure to control his family behaviour
2. David's growing unpopularity among the people
3. David's punishment for the sin against Bathsheba

David, in common with other leaders of Israel, seems to have had difficulty in his relationships with members of his family. There again he had a very large family. To my knowledge he had 8 primary wives during his time in Jerusalem and children by many other women.

Here we may be concerned with Ahinoam's son, Amnon who fell wildly in love with his half-sister Tamar. Tamar and her brother Absalom were the family of David and Maachah. At some point later on Adonijah the son of David and Haggith also caused trouble when he attempted to proclaim himself king right at the end of David's life.

Amnon found he could not contain his passion for his half-sister Tamar and 2 Samuel 13 tells how in a premeditated action he lured and raped the young lady by pretending to be ill.

Absalom sought revenge for this action but bided his time for two years, probably to avert suspicion. Then at a sheep-shearing festival well to the north of Jerusalem he gave instructions to his servants to kill Amnon. At first the remainder of David's sons feared a coup and fled. Eventually it became clear that only Amnon had been targeted.

Absalom, to escape revenge from his father, went into exile in the north for some three years.

The whole situation put David in an invidious position. Clearly Absalom was David's favourite son but he could not condone the murder of one of his sons.

As probably you realize through the intervention of Joab the commander of the army Absalom was allowed to return to Jerusalem, but for a further two years was not allowed into the presence of the king. Eventually he was granted an audience but soon after that Absalom took himself back to the north and mounted the full scale rebellion against his father and against the city of Jerusalem.

We see a weakness in David at this point. Clearly he did not wish to lose the struggle for power, yet prior to the start of the battle he gave his commanders order that they should not harm the young man Absalom.

On learning of Absalom's death, the king shut himself in the gatehouse and wept loudly because of his bereavement, causing the narrator to say, "So the victory that day was turned into mourning... and the people stole into the city that day as people steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle."

The separation of family loyalties and affairs of state produced a real crisis for David and his indecision detracted from his greatness.

Neglect of the Northern Tribes

1 We are, of course, limited by the sources at our disposal, and inasmuch as the Deuteronomic Historian regards history from the point of Judah and Jerusalem, I feel we do not get a clear snapshot of what was going on outside the area of his regard.

How secure was David's grasp on the north. What would the story be like if it was written by scribes who lived in Ephraim?

In chapter 15 we read how "Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel (15:6)" Was he simply a charismatic figure (and the northern tribes were in favour of charisma when it came to choosing their king after the kingdom split) or was there a much deeper dissatisfaction with the bureaucracy and the cult that was emanating from Jerusalem.

I think it is worth noting the dispute in 19:41-43. As King David returned to the city after the rebellion the men of Israel came to the king and complained why have the men of Judah stolen you away and brought you back. There follows a dispute between the men of Judah and the men of Israel in which the men of Israel remind their opponents – "we have ten shares in the king"

2 Also the revolt of Sheba documented in chapter 20 is focused on the north. It is in this chapter that we hear the cry that will be echoed in those chapters after the death of Solomon.

"we have no portion in David,
We have not inheritance in the son of Jesse;
Every man to his tents O Israel.

Clearly there was dissatisfaction with David's rule among the tribes of the north. A dissatisfaction that was quashed rather than addressed by King Solomon.

Despite the two previous issues there is a sense that the story of Absalom's rebellion was seen as a punishment of the king because of his adulterous action with Bathsheba. David's departure from Jerusalem seen as a tactical move in terms of warfare.

Abiathar and Zadok, accompanied by the Levites appear carrying the Ark of the Covenant only to be told to take it back into the city. "If I find favour in the eyes of the Lord he will bring me back.

The route over the Mount of Olives was followed by David who walked barefoot, weeping and with his head covered. This is almost like a pilgrimage of penance.

As the procession passed Bahurim, Shimei (who it is said was of the house of Saul) kicked dust and threw stones at the party.

Abishai one of those forthright sons of Zeruah wanted to go and kill Shimei, but David replies

"Let him alone; let him curse, for the Lord has bidden him. It may be that the Lord will look upon my affliction" (16:11)

David of course has quite a different take on the matter once he is victorious and returning to Jerusalem and part of his final instruction to Solomon just before he dies is the recommendation that Solomon should ensure that "Shimei's grey head goes down to Sheol with blood!"

David and Jerusalem

Jerusalem, probably known as Jebus after its Jebusite inhabitants, stood just south of Saul's stronghold at Gibeon. The site had never been overcome by the Israelite forces. Indeed the central fortress Zion was thought to be impregnable. How Joab and the forces of David managed to capture the city is actually a mystery. The bible says that the Jebusites lined the walls with the blind and the lame as a warning to any attacker of what would befall him. However the forces led by David succeeded in penetrating the city through what the Hebrew describes as a *zinnor*. This could be a water tunnel like one of the many that are being excavated on the Ophel hill or it may be some magical spell. Either way David took the stronghold of Zion and subdued the inhabitants.

Straight away we begin to see a change of tactic here on the part of King David.

1. Obviously the site had strategic importance. Opponents of his regime would have a fight on their hands if they tried to attack him.
2. The city had no previous loyalty to a tribe. It belonged neither to the ten northern tribes nor indeed to Judah and Benjamin. In this respect it had a certain neutrality.
3. Despite the opposition by the inhabitants of the site, David did not carry out the Ban – putting to death men, women and children – compare this with Jericho.

The city was in this respect a city captured by and in the possession of King David. It was almost his personal prize.

Having said that it is worth remembering that David's Jerusalem was quite small. At the time the ancient city of Babylon covered 2500 acres. The nearby town of Hazor covered 200. Jerusalem was probably no more than 15. Recent archaeological discoveries have unearthed some more fortifications around the Gihon Spring – nevertheless it was quite a small site.

An astute politician?

I often wonder how much information David had gleaned about Jerusalem before he attacked it. During the time of his wanderings before the death of Saul had he gained detailed intelligence about the place? He was king at Hebron for seven and a half years. Hebron is just under 20 miles from Jerusalem but it is possible that a highway connected the two (as it does today).

I believe David bided his time. The war against the House of Saul came to an end. After Saul's death, Joab conveniently eliminated Abner, Ishbaal's captain and two villains Rechab and Ba'anah disposed of Ishbaal.

Samuel was also dead.

This last point, I believe is terribly significant. David was astute enough to realize that Saul's reign was constantly monitored by Samuel. As king, Saul controlled the army but Samuel controlled – or wished to control - the sacral aspects of the nation's welfare.

Many of the established shrines such as Shiloh had fallen to the Philistines and so even the traditions attached to holy places needed to be reviewed.

In Jerusalem I think it is likely that David saw an opportunity to remedy much of what had been wrong about the nature of Israelite kingship. This neutral site could not be overseen by any existing Israelite priests or prophets or judges because it had no Israelite history. David would have a much freer hand to define kingship on his own terms, because it was essentially his city and he had emerged as an undisputed leader of the nation.

Was there any religious tradition in Jerusalem at all?

This is a matter of much speculation. All we can say is that when religious matters are spoken about there were many new features that we do not find in the religion of Israel during the period of the judges.

It is likely that a number of gods contributed to the pre-Israelite cult in Jerusalem.

According to Norman Porteous, the name of the city itself suggests a Semitic deity *Shalem Shulman*.

That this continued to be revered may be reflected in the names of two of David's sons Absalom and Solomon.

A note of caution however here inasmuch as Absalom was born to David while he was still at Hebron and Solomon was originally called Jedidiah but the name Solomon was adopted when he came to the throne.

The worship of Shalem was quite widespread and by no means confined to one sanctuary

Another name connected with pre-Israelite Jerusalem is Zedek. This may be found in the name of Adonizedek who is said to be king of Jerusalem (Joshua 10:1) (Zedek is my Lord) and of course Melchizedek mentioned in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110.

I intend to return to Genesis 14 in a moment or so but we may note for the time being that this is a narrative telling how Abraham after defeating the coalition of kings from the lands of the Near East offered tithes to Melchizedek king of Salem

The patriarch is said to have been blessed by Melchizedek in the name of El-Elyon (Lord of sky and land).

In Genesis 14:18-22 this El Elyon is identified with Yahweh and Salem is Jerusalem.

Consolidation of the Cult and Kingship

We have already noted that David did not carry out the ban on the inhabitants of Jerusalem when he captured the city. We might therefore suppose that some sort of treaty of mutual respect was reached.

David was to be king and it seems likely that he began to define that kingship in the terms of the former priest kings of Jerusalem.

Psalm 110

The Lord says to my Lord;

Sit at my right hand till I make your enemies my footstool.

The Lord sends forth from Zion your mighty sceptre

Rule in the midst of your foes....

The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind,

You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.

Also at this time we see the emergence of a new face, Zadok, a priest of uncertain genealogy, who comes to the fore as an associate of Abiathar. Some scholars have suggested that his family may have been associated with the pre-Israelite cult in the city.

Ark was brought to Jerusalem

In 2 Samuel 6 the whole chapter is dedicated to the story of how David brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. This journey had to be broken because of the death of one of the bearers of the Ark and as a result the sacred object resided for a while in the house of Obededom the Gittite. The accident tended to overshadow what I think is a significant development in this chapter. David not only processed ...dancing – an action caused his wife Michal to despise him, but also he wore a linen ephod – a garment primarily designed to be worn by a priest or a cultic leader such as Samuel. He also offered burnt offerings and peace offerings and blessed the people in the name of *Yahweh Sabaoth* (The Lord of Hosts)

It appears that David's solution in capturing the city and adopting some or many of the features of the pre-Israelite cult of Jerusalem could have backfired inasmuch as loyal, devout followers of the Sinai tradition might have objected.

In order to counter this David and/or his advisors made great efforts one might say to weld the two traditions together. Bringing the Ark to Jerusalem was an astute move, but it seems possible that more subtle forces were at work. These may be reflected by a consideration of a number of examples.

Genesis 14

This chapter is much debated among scholars. Some suggest the names and places support a historical basis for the events described, others claim that it is later unhistorical midrash legend. However one area of agreement among most commentators is that the Melchizedek episode vv18-20 is a later insertion. "Its function is to legitimate something namely what took place between Abraham and Melchizedek" *Claus Westermann Genesis p192*

¹⁸ And Melchiz'edek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. *El Elyon*¹⁹ And he blessed him and said,

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High, *El Elyon*
maker of heaven and earth;

²⁰ and blessed be God Most High, *El Elyon*
who has delivered your enemies into your hand!”

And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

It seems likely that the passage is intended to show that the patriarch Abram showed deference to the king of Salem, Melchizedek and received from him a blessing. I think we can only speculate when these verses were added, but we have to face the question were they added in order show the superiority of the Jerusalem tradition over the traditions of the tribes, Sinai and the Exodus.

Tension in the situation

If the Genesis reference was a stand-alone example our thesis might be debatable. There are a multitude of Psalms which seem to elevate the Zion tradition

Psalm 132:13-14

¹³ For the LORD has chosen Zion;
he has desired it for his habitation:
¹⁴ "This is my resting place for ever;
here I will dwell, for I have desired it.

Psalm 78 combines Israel's possession of the land with Yahweh's choice of David and his preference for Mount Zion

He rejected the tent of Joseph,
he did not choose the tribe of E'phraim;
⁶⁸ but he chose the tribe of Judah,
Mount Zion, which he loves.
⁶⁹ He built his sanctuary like the high heavens,
like the earth, which he has founded for ever.
⁷⁰ He chose David his servant,
and took him from the sheepfolds;
⁷¹ from tending the ewes that had young he brought him
to be the shepherd of Jacob his people,
of Israel his inheritance.

Psalm 87

On the holy mount stands the city he founded;
² the LORD loves the gates of Zion
more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.
³ Glorious things are spoken of you,
O city of God.

I am not for a moment trying to suggest that David was the author of the Psalms. I think the Psalm are an indication (albeit a later indication) that a practice was in the process of being accepted that linked the monarchy with Jerusalem (Zion) and the cult.

I am of the opinion that this was a deliberate move by King David in the first instance and that the religious authorities in Jerusalem sought to legitimize and perpetuate this association. I am also of the opinion that despite the fact that it seems pretty fundamental in our reading of the Old Testament especially in the Psalms, the Zion tradition was not supported by the Northern tribes (and don't forget there were ten of them). It was not supported by all of the prophets. We have the view that it is part of orthodox because this particular part of the Old Testament was written by the Deuteronomic Historian – whose key work, whose reference book was Deuteronomy – which spoke of the one central shrine.

God's covenant with David

I would have to say that the election of Mount Zion – ie God's choice of Jerusalem was indissolubly connected with the divine election of David and his dynasty to be rulers of Israel

The doctrine of God's choice of Jerusalem, Mount Zion and David and his dynasty is most certainly early and probably to be linked to either David himself or the period of David and

Solomon. It is inseparably bound up with the oracle of Nathan in 2 Samuel 7 who was aware David has expressed a wish to build a temple
Initially Nathan agreed but as a result of a dream he came back to David with this advice

'Thus says the LORD: Would you build me a house to dwell in? ⁶ I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. *2 Samuel 7:12-13*

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you who shall come forth from your body and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever.

At this point one reaches a cross-roads

Either one says

Here we have the will of God. God has made David king and chosen him to be his servant – indeed The Psalmist in Psalm 2:6 would say his Son.

I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill,
I will tell of the decree of the Lord
He said to me “You are my son, today I have begotten you.”

Or Psalm 89:26

“He (the king) shall cry to me, “Thou art my Father, my God and the Rock of my salvation.”
And I will make him the first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth.
My steadfast love, I will keep for him for ever,
And my covenant will stand firm for him.”

Or we say this is a piece of political theology intended to secure the royal throne in Jerusalem and to serve as a divine authorization for its occupants.

The same is true of the allied doctrine of Yahweh's election of Mount Zion, which sanctioned the installation of the ark in the new cult centre of Israel and at the same time upheld the adoption by Israel of features borrowed from the Pre-Israelite cult of El Elyon in Jerusalem.

Finally where does that leave us with obedience

Was David obedient?

As I said at the beginning it depends on who you are and when you ask the question.

If you were an Israelite living in Jerusalem at the end of King David's reign. You would say yes – it is through the obedience of the king that we have a stable kingdom and the prospect of a strong monarch in Solomon.

If you were an Israelite living in the northern kingdom. You would be less likely to agree. David had fallen foul of every trapping mentioned by the prophet Samuel – and worse, he had diluted the religion of Moses and the Fathers with the worship of other Gods.

Suppose you were living at the time of the Exile the nation had been defeated, the temple had been destroyed. David's successor was in chains and the people were defeated. The Deuteronomic historian had an answer of course. David had by this time been elevated to a position of honour – the founder of the dynasty. It was his successors who had introduced false worship, who had acknowledged of even favoured the religion of other deities.

Then there are the Christians of course. Jesus born in the line of David. Must have been a good chap. I think the glittery lights had come back on by the time that Jesus was born. David's aura had been established – Where was the Christ to be born – in Bethlehem because that is where David was born.

Ask yourself the question where would Judaism be today if there was no Zion tradition – if there was no Jerusalem. Even the great annual celebration of the escape from Egypt, Pesach – the Passover ends with words "Next year in Jerusalem"