

HPRS4905

King David in the Hebrew Bible

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There are many important figures portrayed in the Bible, some more familiar than others, but all described for their memorable acts. We each, no doubt, have our favourite – a story fondly remembered from Sunday school, a figure whose story resonates with us, or we find meaningful, or even a name we have memories of because of their egregious acts, which we may try hard to forget. The Bible is full of wonder, awe and discovery, sadness, concern and upset, but also, as we sometimes may forget, it is an account of real people living real lives. There are many notable names to consider, amongst which are the Kings of the time, with the most famous being David and Solomon, a father and son, both rulers over Israel, and both known for their individual accomplishments. The story of King David's life from shepherd boy to king is abound with interesting events which outline his importance in Biblical literature. His early life, rise to King Saul's court, appointment as King, and his status within modern day religion will be examined in the following account.

The early years of many biblical figures are frequently not accounted for; with descriptions often being vague at best, leaving the reader to ponder over issues such as birthplace, lineage, religious upbringing and socio-economic background. Fortunately, this is not the case with David, as the texts provide us with an impressively comprehensive account of events in his life in the approximately 1100 entries referring to him.¹ This is helpful to the reader as it demonstrates the stark difference from where he began to the position he found himself in as king, offering a basis of understanding to what many of his decisions as king may have been based upon.

David's early life was as a shepherd boy, tending his father's flock in Bethlehem.² The first mention of David as a shepherd is in 1 Samuel 16:11. Under God's instruction, Samuel went to visit Jesse the Bethlehemite to anoint a King over Saul. Samuel invited Jesse to a sacrifice to the Lord, where Jesse had introduced all of his sons except for one, explaining that his youngest son was in the field tending to the sheep. Samuel saw Jesse's sons who were of good stature and strong looking, but God informed Samuel that none of these were to be chosen. Samuel evidently was not looking for the same qualities as God, as Warren Wiersbe describes, 'God alone can search the human heart and know what a person's motives really are'.³ He also suggests that Samuel's tendency to gauge potentiality based upon outward physical appearance had made this mistake previously with Saul. As described by Ryan Kelly, God's plan was for a humble king, who's righteousness would provide Israel with a king unlike those within the nations surrounding Israel.⁴

¹ Joseph M. Jordan, 'How many times is David mentioned in the Bible? (Who was David in the Bible, what does the Bible say about David)', *Christian Faith Guide*, (2025) < <https://christianfaithguide.com/how-many-times-is-david-mentioned-in-the-bible> > [accessed 23rd July 2025].

² Jonathan Kirsch, *King David: The Real Life of the Man Who Ruled Israel*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000).

³ Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: Old Testament*, (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2007), p.520.

⁴ Ryan Kelly, *1-2 Samuel: A 12-Week Study*, (Illinois: Crossway, 2018).

The next account we see of David is when Saul requests someone to come to him and play the lyre in an effort to ease the torment he was feeling at losing God's spirit, which had been replaced by an evil spirit (1 Sam. 16:14-18). Brooke Conti cites Bunyen when she likens Saul's torment to a depressive mental illness, which highlights the emptiness felt when a person loses God.⁵ Saul's servants suggest Jesse's son David for the task as he is a skilled musician, and so he is brought to Saul. Saul begins to favour David as he plays the lyre for him when he is feeling down, relieving him of his distress. Saul makes a request to Jesse that David stay in his service and becomes his armour-bearer (1 Sam. 16:19-23). David's ability to soothe Saul's distress demonstrates not only his musical skills, but also his creative approach to discovering resolutions.

Probably the most famous account of David before he became king was his slaying of Goliath. The story tells of how the Philistine army were invading territories belonging to the Israelites when they came to Khirbet Qeiyafa in the Ellah Valley. This had strategic relevance for the Israelite fighting forces, as it was a main route to Bethlehem, Hebron and Jerusalem.⁶ It was here that David, a teenager at the time, slew the giant Goliath using along a slingshot. David had not been part of the army and was taking food to his brothers who were fighting under King Saul. The stones from his slingshot caught Goliath in the head and he fell to the ground where David proceeded to decapitate him (1 Sam. 17: 1-52). Throughout the encounter, David speaks that it is God's will that he will be victorious, demonstrating his faith in the Lord, (Psalm 23). What now for David? Saul admired David for his courage and success and set a meeting with him. As described by Ahmed Musa,

For David, this meeting marked the beginning of a journey that would lead him deeper into the complexities of royal life. While he had won the favor of the people and the admiration of Saul's son Jonathan, he would soon face the darker side of the king's growing insecurity.⁷

David was appointed as Saul's army commander and was victorious in many battles defending Israel. Saul, however, became increasingly jealous of David and the admiration he had gained and began to fear losing his rule. This is interesting as Saul had shied away from being appointed king originally, (1 Sam. 10:22). Was this then an indication that he had come to enjoy the admiration of being king over the duty it held? His jealousy even extended to attempts on David's life,^{8,9} but as suggested by Alfred Edersheim, his jealousy may have been misdirected,

⁵ Brooke Conti, *Confessions of Faith in Early Modern England*, (Philadelphia: University Of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

⁶ Yosef Garfinkel, Saar Ganor, Michael G. Hasel, *In the Footsteps of King David: Revelations From An Ancient Biblical City*, (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2018).

⁷ Ahmed Musa, *The Shepherd vs. the Giant: David Slays Goliath*, <https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_Shepherd_vs_the_Giant_David_Slays_Go/y1A3EQAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=what+did+slaying+goliath+mean+for+David&pg=PT58&printsec=frontcover> Section 10., [accessed 27 July 2025].

⁸ J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁹ Paul Borgman, *David, Saul, and God: Rediscovering an Ancient Story*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

‘Yet in reality it was against Jehovah that he contended rather than against David. So true is it that all sin is ultimately against the Lord...’¹⁰

During his time serving Saul, David became great friends with Saul’s son Jonathan. Their bond was so great that they swore a covenant before God, (1 Sam. 20:16). Speculation of this bond has suggested a homosexual connection between them; a practice which was frequent in the Middle East at the time.^{11;12} This is perhaps corroborated in the book of 1 Samuel, when Saul states ‘You son of a rebellious woman! Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of your mother’s nakedness?’ (1 Sam. 20:30). Their bond, however, could also been one of love and respect as with one brother to another, or their mutual love of God.^{13;14}

Saul’s increasing jealousy forced David to flee from the court at Gibeah, eventually finding himself in the wilderness. Before reaching the wilderness, David had visited a number of areas, gathering his people as he travelled. Saul followed David and one notable devastating event took place at Nob where Saul had eighty-five priests, along with the community, killed for helping David, (Sam. 1 22: 18-20). David came across Saul twice during this time, sparing his life on both occasions, (1 Sam. 24: 1-19, 1 Sam. 26:1-13). David clearly respected that God had anointed Saul, and that David had a loving and forgiving nature.^{15;16}

Over the next ten to fifteen years (there is no account of an actual timeline) David fought many battles for which he called upon God for guidance.¹⁷ During this time, David continued writing psalms; Psalm 63 and 54 being relevant to his situation at the time. When Saul died, David was officially anointed as King over the tribe of Judah, and eventually became the king over all of Israel. During his reign, King David was attributed with many notable battles and important decisions for Israel, such as taking Jerusalem from the Canaanites and making it the capital, expanding Israel’s territory, unifying the tribes of Israel, and bringing the Ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, magnifying the spiritual importance of this holy place.¹⁸

King David’s many military victories expanded the kingdom and wealth of Judah, but unlike his predecessor, David’s faith in God was unwavering.¹⁹ That is not to say that he followed the rules set out by God faithfully. In Deuteronomy 17, there are clear guidelines set out by God

¹⁰ Alfred Edersheim, *The Bible History: Israel Under Samuel, Saul, and David, to the Birth of Solomon*, Vol. IV, (Frankfurt: Verlag, 2024), p.96.

¹¹ Tom Horner, *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality In Biblical Times*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978).

¹² Rosemary Radford Ruether. Forward. In: Dirk von der Horst, *Jonathan’s Loves, David’s Laments: Gay Theology, Musical Desires, and Historical Difference*, (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2017).

¹³ Ray Ortlund Jr. Forward. In: Drew Hunter, *Made for Friendship: The Relationship That Halves Our Sorrows and Doubles Our Joys*, (Illinois: Crossway, 2018).

¹⁴ Michael Eschelbach, Curtis Giese, Paul Puffe, *Called to be God’s People: An Introduction to the Old Testament*, ed. by Andrew E. Steinmann, (Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006).

¹⁵ Paul Borgman, *David, Saul, and God: Rediscovering an Ancient Story*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁶ Benjamin J.M. Johnson, *David: A Man after God’s Own Heart*, (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021).

¹⁷ Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: Old Testament*, (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2007).

¹⁸ Louise Chipley Slavicek, *King David*, (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009).

¹⁹ Latanya M. Hughes, *When God is First Secrets from Heaven are Revealed: A Sequel, Pray and Expect an Answer!*, 2nd ed. (California: Resource Publications, 2025).

for the conduct of Israelite kings, David's conduct whilst king however, appears to contradict the majority of those guidelines. One of his most written about transgressions was committing adultery with Bathsheba, who was married at the time to the Hittite Uriah, one of his soldiers. Bathsheba became pregnant by David, who then arranged for Uriah to be killed in battle, after which David married her.^{20;21} Their union however, was punished by God on a number of occasions, causing tragedies for their family, and problems during his kingship.

The first tragedy to befall David and Bathsheba was the death of their child who was conceived as a result of their adultery. In 2 Samuel 12, we see Nathan explaining to David the punishment God will place upon David's house as a result of his sins against the Lord. He tells him that he has not only sinned directly, but that he has opened up sin to others by his example. God placed sickness upon the newborn child, who died on its seventh day. The fact that the child died before the day of circumcision (typically the eighth day), meant that he did not become a child of the covenant of Abraham.²² Adam Harwood draws a parallel between the child's death as a result of David's sin and the death of children during the flood as a result of others' actions. He also discusses how we are all born with the sin of Adam, but that God does not judge us on this basis, therefore the child would not be judged for his father's sins.²³ In David's acceptance of God's will in this event, we see unwavering faith, and the significance of repentance.

King David faced adversity throughout his reign, but his repentance to God was also present throughout. His actions as king were directed by God, and as such have endured through the ages. The Psalms that David wrote are of great significance, and are relevant even today, not only in Christianity and Judaism, but also in the Muslim faith where David is considered a prophet.²⁴ The resulting Davidic lineage, as prophesied, brought us the Messiah, bringing peace and justice to the world; taking the fundamental faith that David fought for, and developing it into the faith we practice today. His lineage is also integral to Rastafarianism, with the Lion of Judah - which was associated with David - being symbolic within the faith.²⁵ David was a 'relatable' king, a figure who portrayed failure as well as success, with the accounts of his life providing us with lessons with which to learn.

The recorded history of King David shows his path from a shepherd boy, unassuming, caring and faithful, to a king who battled to establish Israel as the spiritually significant place we know it as today. His errors, and achievements, seem to demonstrate his ability to face adversity whilst maintaining his faith in God as the most important aspect of his life. Mentioned in this account, but not detailed, Psalms written by David hold true as a representation of life, which can be called upon to help us understand ourselves, our faith, and our relationship with God.

²⁰ David J. Shepherd, *King David, Innocent Blood and Bloodguilt*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

²¹ Jeremy M. Hutton, *The Transjordanian Palimpsest: The Overwritten Texts of Personal Exile and Transformation in the Deuteronomistic History*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009).

²² Scott W. Hahn, *Kingship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfilment of God's Saving Promises*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

²³ Paige Patterson, Foreward. In: Adam Harwood, *The Spiritual Condition of Infants: A Biblical-Historical Survey and Systemic Proposal*, (Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011).

²⁴ Marzena Zawadowska & Mateusz Wilk eds. *The Character of David in Judaism, Christianity and Islam Warrior, Poet, Prophet and King- Themes in Biblical Narrative*, (Massachusetts: Brill, 2021).

²⁵ Empress Yuajah, *Rastafari: Beliefs & Principles*, (California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

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<https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_Shepherd_vs_the_Giant_David_Slays_Go/y1A3EQAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=what+did+slaying+goliath+mean+for+david&pg=PT58&printsec=frontcover> Section 10., [accessed 27 July 2025].

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