

Scripture **from** Scratch

A popular guide to understanding the Bible

David: Israel's Poet King

by Rev. Alfred McBride, O. Praem.

'David Bests Moses in Old Testament Poll' read an eye-catching headline in the daily paper recently.

Biblical Archeology Review reported that a survey of more than 8,000 people revealed King David as the most popular male figure in the Hebrew Scriptures, winning over Moses by a slim margin. Certainly David's story, told in 1 and 2 Samuel, has long captivated us, from his boyhood feat of defeating Goliath with a slingshot to his seduction of Bathsheba to his supposed authorship of the biblical psalms.

David was a shepherd who became a king and a shrewd political leader. He was a poet musician; the psalms sung all over the world every day are attributed to David. He was a sinner who was humble enough to admit his fall and repent. We remember and honor David for his sanctity and faith. When the Church prays, she chooses the psalms of David. The prophets converted David's kingship into a spiritual hope for a saving messiah who would be redemptive rather than political. The angel Gabriel told Mary that her son would sit on the throne of David.

This beloved Old Testament figure, the eighth son of Jesse, was a red-haired, fair-faced young man, a shepherd and a musician. How did he move from tending sheep to ruling a nation?



Illustrations by A. Joseph Barrish, S.M.

Saul's Fall, David's Rise

The first king of Israel, Saul, had been called by God to be a religious as well as political and military leader of his people. (His story can be found in 1 Samuel 9—13.) Saul failed his religious mission because of his lack of faith. God then called the prophet Samuel to go to Jesse's family, of the tribe of Judah, and select David and anoint him heir to the throne. The divine choice would be fulfilled in a series of providentially

guided human events.

The Bible gives two accounts of how Saul came to know David. Hearing of David's skill with the harp and his gift of singing poetry, Saul invited him to his court to play for him when he felt depressed. David charmed away the king's sadness (1 Samuel 16:14-18).

The second story is the well known account of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17). The slender shepherd youth, relying on God's protection, used a stone and a slingshot to kill the huge, experienced Philistine warrior. David's



on more dangerous, even life-threatening missions.

On a personal matter, Saul embarrassed and humiliated David by first offering him the great honor of his eldest daughter's hand in marriage. Then shortly before the wedding Saul arranged for her marriage to someone else. When Saul's younger daughter, Michal, said she loved David and wanted to marry him, Saul saw it as yet another opportunity to control David. Luckily, Michal really loved David and protected her new husband from some lethal attacks by her father.

Saul's erratic behavior also intruded on David's deep friendship with Jonathan, the king's son. "And Jonathan entered into a bond with David, because he loved him as himself" (1 Samuel 18:3). Seemingly unable to love or be loved, Saul could not bear to see love between other people. The king concluded he must kill David. Jonathan informed David and helped him escape (1 Samuel 19:1-3).

David went into desert exile. In that forced retreat David meditated on God and deepened his faith. "I lie prostrate in the midst of lions...[but] my heart is steadfast, O God" (Psalm 57:5, 8). Saul, however, would not settle

for an exiled David; instead of attending to affairs of state, Saul exhausted his energies in pursuing his rival to destroy him.

At the same time, David never raised his hand against the king and did nothing to gain the crown. One day Saul entered a cave "to ease nature" (1 Samuel 24). David and his men were in the deeper recesses of the cave. David found Saul asleep there. He was tempted to kill the king and put an end to Saul's bitterness against him. But David rejected the temptation, for, by the rules of war, no soldier should murder a sleeping man. He simply settled for snipping a piece of the royal garment as a trophy. He even felt guilty about so innocent an act, for one should not "touch the Lord's anointed" without permission.

David retreated to a safe distance outside the cave and yelled to wake the king and tell him how he had spared his life. Saul experienced a temporary pang of remorse and thanked David for his mercy. He made David promise that if he became the next king, he would spare Saul's descendants. David readily agreed.

But Saul soon forgot his momentary repentance and again vowed to eliminate his presumed enemy. Just before his last campaign, Saul disguised himself and consulted the Witch of Endor about his prospects. He had banished

courage attracted Saul, who hired David as one of his military leaders.

The brave and handsome David was irresistibly appealing to women. They sang, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands" (1 Samuel 18:7). Even the most secure of kings might resent hearing that he was only one-tenth the fighter his lieutenant was. The emotionally unstable Saul was consumed with jealousy at such an unfavorable comparison.

From this point on, the relationship between Saul and David deteriorated. One painful episode followed another. One day, while David was playing the harp for Saul, the king suddenly picked up his spear and hurled it murderously at David. The agile young officer evaded the shot (1 Samuel 18:10-11). Next, Saul kept promoting David to more responsible military leadership, but at the same time ordered him to go



Praying With Scripture

- **"Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The Church fulfills this call in the Liturgy of the Hours, which flows toward and away from the central celebration of the Eucharist. St. Augustine added that our longing for God is another way to pray always. This yearning is a prayer even when we say no words. When David was in desert exile, he composed Psalm 63, a prayer of longing for God: "O God, you are my God, for you I long. My body thirsts for you like a dry land without water." Pray this psalm and Psalm 42.**

all witches, but this one survived. He asked her to conjure up Samuel for him. The witch recognized the king, but when she was reassured that he would not harm her, she went on. She summoned Samuel from the dead. Samuel said that Saul was wrong to have disobeyed the Lord. Samuel predicted that Saul and his sons would die in battle the next day and the enemy would triumph.

Some have noted the similarity of this scene with modern spiritualism. The Witch of Endor was conducting a seance. Only she saw "Samuel." She may have used ventriloquism to fake his voice. She would have taken pleasure in predicting Saul's downfall, avenging her fellow magicians for the treatment they had received from Saul.

Saul's turn to a witch was another sign of his retreat from God and ultimately the omen of his downfall. In his last battle at Mount Gilboa, Saul realized his imminent defeat. Knowing capture was at hand, he threw himself upon his sword (1 Samuel 31). An alternate account (2 Samuel 1:1-16) of his death reports that he asked an enemy soldier to finish him off since he was not yet dead but in great pain from his self-inflicted wound. Because Jonathan and Saul's other two sons had also been killed that day, he knew his dynasty was finished.

David mourned the deaths in his elegy, *The Song of the Bow*. "Women of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you in scarlet and finery.... I grieve for you, Jonathan, my brother! Most dear have you been to me" (2 Samuel 1:24, 26).

David the King

Though David had already been anointed by God to be the new king, the 30-year-old leader understood that he must gain support for his crown. Methodically, he did so in four stages.

First, he went to the venerable city of Hebron, the ancient capital of Judah, the southern tribe. Among his own people he was acclaimed as king. There

he built a solid foundation for his monarchy amid the clans who clung to the traditions of the nomadic life. Around the cave of the patriarchs, their memories and proud traditions stretched back to Abraham. David robed himself in the mystical memories of his people. He ruled seven years at Hebron.

Second, David needed the allegiance of the chiefs of the northern tribes of Israel. They must be organized under

industrious Joab, David's military commander, and his scouts found an inner vertical shaft, cut through the rock, that connected the city above with the water supply below. Thinking the shaft would never be discovered by an enemy it remained unprotected. Through it David and his soldiers entered the city and conquered it. Thus the holy city of Jerusalem was born on Mount Zion. It became the political,



Living the Scriptures

- **Over a period of time, read the life of David in the Bible (1 Samuel 16—31; 2 Samuel 1—24; 1 Kings 1—2). Note his virtues of loyalty to family, friends and principles, faith in God, commitment to prayer. From your meditations draw applications for your personal life and relationships.**

one king who would lead them in victorious campaigns against the Philistines and other neighboring tribes. In a series of small wars, the remaining descendants of Saul were killed. Though David was not involved in these deaths, he benefitted from them. He soon emerged as the undisputed leader of all Israel and Judah.

Third, David realized he needed a more central capital for its strategic and symbolic value. He envisioned a fortress city that would link Judah in the south with the tribes of Israel in the north. He found exactly what he wanted in the fortress of Jerusalem, inhabited then by Jebusites. Towering over the midpoint between north and south, the fort was protected by the Kidron valley to the east and the Hinnon valley to the west, each valley meeting the other in the south. Heavy walls protected the northern exposure.

The Jebusites were so confident about their invincibility that they jibed, "You cannot enter here. The blind and the lame will drive you away" (2 Samuel 5:7). In other words it scarcely needed to be guarded. But the

spiritual and moral center of God's people.

David's fourth and final strategy was to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. The transfer of this most sacred object of Israelite religion to Jerusalem legitimated the kingship of David and spiritually united all the tribes, north and south. Since the glory of God had often settled on the Ark in a shining cloud, the Ark was the most precious historic link to God's presence among the Hebrew people. God had spoken to them from the Ark.

The Ark had been secured in the tiny village of Baala in Judah. The procession of the Ark of God's glory to the Holy City was marked by religious pageantry. "David and all the Israelites made merry before the Lord with all their strength, with singing and with citharas, harps, tambourines, sistrums and cymbals.... Then David, girt with a linen apron, came dancing before the Lord with abandon" (2 Samuel 6:5, 14). Thus was God enthroned on Mount Zion. But David's dancing aroused the scorn of his wife Michal. "How the king has honored himself today, exposing

himself to the view of the slave girls as a commoner might do" (2 Samuel 6:20). David reminded her he was only honoring God who had repudiated her father's dynasty. In proof of this repudiation, she remained childless to her death.

King David hired able Phoenician architects to build him a suitable palace and government buildings. He toyed with the idea of constructing a temple for the Ark, but God revealed to him the singular beauty of preserving the Ark in its ancient style, a nomadic tent, linking it more intimately to the purity and simplicity of the ancient faith.

As the King aged, presiding contentedly over his national state, his generals advised him to stay at home protected from danger at the front, where small wars slowly expanded his kingdom's territory.

Shadows Over the Golden Years

But two shadows spoiled those golden years. David committed adultery with Bathsheba, lied to her husband about it and conspired to have him killed at the front (2 Samuel 11). The prophet Nathan confronted David with his sin, which he repented. David's sorrow is memorialized in Psalm 51, the greatest act of contrition ever composed.

Second, David's son Absalom betrayed him and mounted an insurrection against him. At one point David was forced to flee for his life (2 Samuel 15:1-23). Eventually, the revolt was suppressed and Absalom brutally killed. David, always a loving father, mourned the loss of his son with wild grief, despite the filial betrayal. "My son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you" (2 Samuel 19:1).

David had hoped to build a Temple, but the prophet Nathan told him that was not God's will for him. At the same time, Nathan assured David of the fidelity of God's promise, "Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me" (2 Samuel 7:16). The angel Gabriel refers to this in the annunciation to Mary: "The Lord God will give him [Jesus] the throne of David his father" (Luke 1:32).

In the 70th and final year of his life, the rugged old king's bones were cold. His attendants brought a beautiful young woman, Abishag, to sleep with him and warm him, but David accepted her only as a nurse.

His final decision on his deathbed was to ensure that Solomon would succeed him to the throne. Of the 70 psalms attributed to David, it is likely that Psalm 23, with words that today console so many on the final journey, would have comforted the dying king. "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. Even though I walk in the dark

valley, I fear no evil; for you are at my side" (Psalm 23:1, 4).

David was buried on Mount Zion, quite near the Ark of the Covenant. "David rested with his ancestors and was buried in the City of David. The length of David's reign over Israel was forty years: he reigned seven years at Hebron and thirty-three years in Jerusalem" (1 Kings 2:11).

We draw from David's life a motivation to have deep faith in God, a commitment to prayer, honesty about our moral lives, a willingness to repent our sins and a hope for salvation. By God's will and grace, David prepared the world for Jesus. Now it is our turn to share our faith in Jesus with others. ■

Alfred McBride is a Norbertine priest and a member of St. Norbert Abbey, De Pere, Wisconsin. For many years he has been involved in a catechetical approach to doctrine and Scripture. He is a nationally renowned lecturer and writer on these topics.

Next: Seeking the Language of God (By Virginia Smith)



Talking About Scripture

- **Read the Christmas stories in Matthew 1—2 and Luke 1—2. Note how often David is mentioned. Why was it valuable to connect the birth of Jesus with the life of David?**
- **Talk about some ways to make the psalms part of your daily prayer.**



Reading About Scripture

- **Payne, David F. *I and II Samuel*, Daily Bible Study Series. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982.**
- **McBride, Alfred, O. *Praem. Images of Jesus: Ten Invitations to Intimacy*. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1993.**