King David, Sacred and Secular

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A magnificent mosaic from the sixth-century synagogue of Gaza features David playing the lyre, with wild animals in attendance. David wears a Byzantine emperor’s robes, and the iconography is reminiscent of Orpheus, singer and poet of Greek myth. But when Egyptian archaeologists first excavated the building in the 1960s, it was identified as a church—and the figure was mistaken for a female saint.

How could any image of David, greatest king of Israel, ever be mistaken for a woman? Given the picture of David in 21st-century scholarship, this would seem impossible. We have, instead, a hyper-masculine figure of political machinations and military might, known for unifying disparate tribes into a nation.

This martial and national David has become the dominant way he is remembered in contemporary biblical scholarship and political discourse. Research on the historical David reconstructs his military conquests; memory studies consider him a rallying point of national identity in the ancient sources; and political propaganda highlights David as Israel’s founder, who—according to maximalist reconstructions of the Bible—ruled from Jerusalem over a large unified Israel 3,000 years ago.

To see the greatest king of Israel as a symbol of nationhood seems obvious today. But startlingly, it was not obvious to the ancient inheritors of David’s story. In fact, the current fascination with both the “historical” David of national politics, and his function in memory as an icon of identity, is a recent one. It is the latest interpretive reinvention of a figure who has been a shape-shifter throughout Jewish tradition. From the earliest recoverable interpretive traditions, David was, instead, a visionary poet, ethical exemplar, prophet, and even heavenly being. We see these priorities in later layers of biblical literature, such as the books of Chronicles and Psalms, as well as the Dead Sea Scrolls and rabbinic literature.
The earliest sources about King David—interwoven narratives in the biblical books of Samuel—do describe a warrior who unifies separate tribes into a single political formation. With early layers likely originating in some form close to the time of David himself, the texts show evidence of multiple sources combined over time. In the biblical text we now have—and the historical reliability of these episodes is fiercely debated—David rises to replace King Saul, unites Israel's tribes, conquers its enemies, and establishes his capital in Jerusalem. Scholars note that parts of the text may be propaganda or apologetics: they “spin” the story, putting David, considered by some to be a usurper, into a better light. For example, the text takes pains to insist that David had nothing to do with Saul's death. Sometimes, these texts seem to protest too much, suggesting there was something sordid to hide.

But the books of Samuel hardly idealize David; sometimes they even condemn him explicitly. In the most famous example, when David impregnates Bathsheba and sends her husband to certain death, his prophet Nathan condemns him. And the triumph of the statesman is inextricably bound up with its own undoing. David's victories come at almost unbearable cost. His family implodes. One son, Amnon, rapes a daughter, Tamar, who then lives "desolate" in the home of her other brother, Absalom; David does nothing. Plotting revenge for two years, Absalom finally kills Amnon. This picture of the center of the "house of David" collapsing upon itself—a daughter raped by a son, shut in another son's home, and brother killing brother—contrasts with the external expansion of the state. Finally, the family crisis encroaches upon David's state-building, with Absalom's military rebellion. David's victory over his son, and Absalom's death, look, to the biblical writer, like abject failure, with the victorious army mourning as if they had lost.

Finally—in the midst of sordid courtly intrigue that he no longer controls—David dies, shivering and impotent.

But this embarrassing, farcical death is only the beginning of David's life story in Jewish tradition. Which threads of David's biography resonated most in the earliest separate traditions of reception? Not his statesmanship or military prowess. The book of Chronicles reproduces much of Samuel, but what it chooses to embellish is telling: David, through revelation, receives the divine blueprint for the Temple, and teaches the Levites to sing. This David is a priestly figure, invoked as an exemplar of worship and prayer. Related to this is the memory of David in Psalm headings (written after the psalms themselves), which place them in David's mouth at particular episodes in his
biography. There, a distinct pattern emerges: a concentration on lament, fear, and contrition. They present a suffering, penitent David, not a triumphant king—they are attached to psalms of lament, and refer to moments of crisis.

If there is a powerful strand of anguish in the memory of the human David, another interpretive thread makes him superhuman. One passage in a Psalms manuscript from the Dead Sea Scrolls celebrates him as

wise, and luminous like the light of the sun, and a scribe, and discerning, and perfect in all his paths before God and men....

And he wrote psalms: three thousand six hundred; and songs to be sung before the altar... The total was four thousand and fifty.

All these he spoke through prophecy which had been given to him by the Most High.

This idealized David is responsible for thousands of divinely revealed songs. His sun-like radiance recalls Moses’s shining face on Sinai and descriptions of heavenly angels in apocalyptic texts.

Rising above his identity as a king, then a perfect scribe, David transcends the impotent death described in the Bible: in interpretive history, he comes to dwell in heaven. In *The Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, a Second Temple period text, David is a companion of the angels with Enoch and Elijah—the two deathless, ascended figures of early Jewish tradition. Even more developed is the “David Apocalypse,” found in manuscripts of the mystical compilation *Heikhalot Rabbati*. There, the heavenly David wears a crown of precious stones, fragrant with spices, with the “sun and moon and twelve constellations on it.” Bolts of lightning, hail, snow, clouds, stars, constellations surround him, and the seraphim run out singing to greet him. David sits on a huge fiery throne, and his brilliant crown’s radiance spreads across the world. He is a cosmic figure, a celestial king, and leads angelic beings in song.

Here, and in other sources, David is master of time and space: he structures the calendar, and his power extends to the ends of the earth. This is one way of overcoming the human anguish and failure in the early texts—turning him into a divine figure. Other trajectories exist as well: in rabbinic literature, along with messianic expectations connected to his line, he becomes a rabbi, pronouncing on Jewish law.

The Gaza synagogue mosaic is now at the Museum of the Good Samaritan near Ma’ale Adumim in the West Bank. The museum uses archaeological artifacts to communicate a message about Israel’s historical claim to the land, while presenting the site as a Christian pilgrimage destination. The mosaic’s context of display in the 21st century, and the mosaic itself as it was created by a sixth-century craftsman—for whom David was an Orpheus-like musician with power over nature—tell a complex story about the afterlives and uses of biblical traditions.

Modern scholarship has privileged the secular David, the figure of politics and national identity—both in reconstructing the David of history and in considering what he has meant in cultural memory. To be sure, in Samuel, David is a military and political actor—but he is also a sacralized figure from the very start: an inspired singer, an exorcist, and a person who experiences fear and failure, but also divine forgiveness and inspiration. And it is those other aspects of David’s memory that became most salient, forming the basis for embellishment and transformation. These shifting biographies reveal how the Jewish past is shaped over time, and the kinds of Judaism these portraits reflect and create.
Dionysius Exiguus reading from his Paschal Table as two other monks help him calculate time.