



King David: A Biography

By Steven L. McKenzie

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One of the most important and complex characters in the Bible, King David has been the subject of innumerable portraits, both artistic and literary.

Michaelangelo's magnificent sculpture of him is perhaps the single best known work of art in the world, and the story of the humble shepherd who slew Goliath and became king has assumed a powerful mythological status. But was David a real person--and if so what *kind* of person was he?

Through a close and critical reading of biblical texts, ancient history, and recent archeological discoveries, Steven L. McKenzie concludes that David was indeed a real person. This David, however, was no hero but a usurper, adulterer, and murderer--a Middle Eastern despot of a familiar type. McKenzie shows that the story of humble beginnings is utterly misleading: "shepherd" is a metaphor for "king," and David came from a wealthy, upper-class background. Similarly, McKenzie reveals how David's ascent to power, traditionally attributed to popularity and divine blessing, in fact resulted from a campaign of terror and assassination. While instituting a full-blown Middle Eastern monarchy, David was an aggressive leader, a devious politician, and a ruthless war chief.

Throughout his scandalous reign, important figures who stood in his way died at convenient times, under questionable circumstances. Even his own sons were not spared. David's story, writes McKenzie, "reads like a modern soap opera, with plenty of sex, violence, and struggles for power."

Carefully researched and vividly written, *King David: An Unauthorized Biography* offers a provocative reappraisal of the life of one of the Bible's most compelling figures.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

King David: A Biography is a revisionist account of a life that has been viewed as heroic throughout history. Taking a stance against this traditional view, Hebrew scholar Steven L. McKenzie maintains that David was in fact tyrannical to the bone. Thus, McKenzie's version of the David story "reads like a modern soap opera, with plenty of sex, violence, and struggles for power." McKenzie's arguments are based on ancient inscriptions and archaeological artifacts that shed light on the biblical stories of David's reign--and on the Bible stories themselves. (Throughout the book, McKenzie also refers to the many poems, plays, novels, paintings, and sculptures that have helped shape David's reputation.) The key to McKenzie's argument is the apologetic tone of the biblical David stories, which he traces with enthusiastic rigor. McKenzie explains: "The fact that the author felt the need to try to explain the motives behind David's deeds indicates that those deeds were widely believed to have occurred. An author would not invent accusations against David--such as that he once served as a mercenary to the Philistines--just to try to explain them away." In other words, McKenzie believes that the Bible's misrepresentation of King David's despotic reign is the best evidence that the Bible is historically reliable. It's a somewhat contorted argument, but it has been the consensus among Hebrew scholars for some time. McKenzie has done readers a great service by writing an accessible version of this important academic theory so that lay readers will be better equipped to judge David's reputation for themselves. --*Michael Joseph Gross*

From Publishers Weekly

The conventional, laudatory image of David as a simple shepherd boy who courageously slew Goliath and rose to become Israel's greatest king despite some human failings is disputed by McKenzie, an associate professor of Hebrew Bible at Rhodes College in Memphis. His biography emphasizes the negative aspects of David's character and minimizes his achievements. McKenzie begins by identifying the sparse contributions of archeology to the story of David and then describes the sections of the Bible that deal with the enigmatic shepherd-king. McKenzie's suggestion that it would be helpful to have a copy of the Bible at hand while reading his book should be strongly emphasized. Fortunately, readers can turn to Robert Alter's 1999 volume, *The David Story*, for a translation and insightful commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel and the first two chapters of 1 Kings, in which David's life is recounted. Alter's sober presentation balances McKenzie's strident depiction of David as a "Middle Eastern tyrant" who was "senile and flaccid" in his dying days. Early in his life, according to McKenzie, David was a "ruthless... mercenary" who tried to "usurp" King Saul's throne. McKenzie claims that his portrait of David as a brazen adulterer, power-hungry politician, grim assassin and wanton murderer is "a realistic likeness." (Apr.)

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From Library Journal

Scholarship relating to the Bible tends to gravitate toward two extremes: the apologetic and devotional camp finesses difficulties and sees pure heroes and villains, while the skeptical and secular camp takes the Bible to be a purely human creation untainted by divine intervention. McKenzie (Hebrew Bible, Rhodes Coll.; *The Hebrew Bible Today*), who clearly belongs in the latter camp, laments that there are few "real" biographies of David. A careful and accomplished scholar, he begins solidly with the recognition that the Deuteronomist's goal was not to recount what happened but to use what happened to instruct the reader. Nevertheless, McKenzie asserts that there is much of historical value in the text and sets forth three guidelines for the analysis of data. As a result, a real King David, who ruled over a real kingdom, emerges as a typical Eastern monarch of his time, albeit one of exceptional ability, who connived, murdered, pillaged, betrayed, and ruthlessly crushed all opposition. This work ought to get enough disdain from both extremes to

make it very profitable reading for the informed and thoughtful student. Recommended for public and academic libraries.

-Eugene O. Bowser, Univ. of Northern Colorado, Greeley
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Users Review

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Meredith Butler:

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