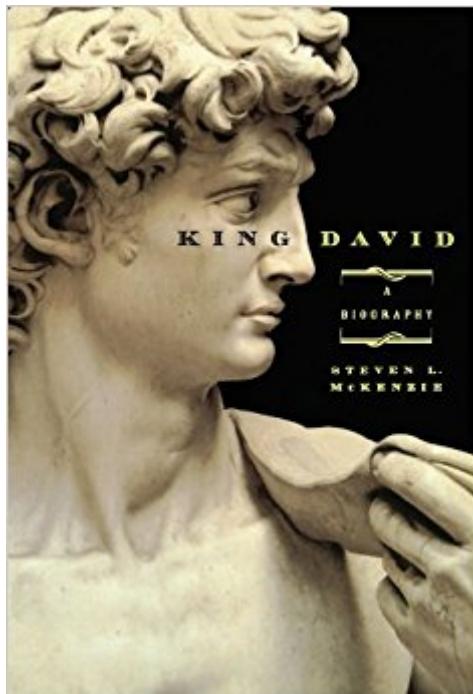


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King David: A Biography



Synopsis

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 was not the humble shepherd who slew Goliath and became king, however, but was 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."

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Customer Reviews

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 --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

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.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

In King David Steven McKenzie attempts to write an historical biography of David. He states that much of this biographical information is widely accepted among scholars, but unfamiliar to laypeople. Therefore, McKenzie has written this book as an attempt to make the widely held

scholarly views accessible to laypeople. To this end, McKenzie begins by discussing the sources outside of Scripture that can inform an historical biography of David. These include several ancient inscriptions and steles. McKenzie concludes that these offer evidence of David's historical existence, but little more. Within Scripture, the sources are Samuel, Chronicles, and some of the Psalm headings. However, both Chronicles and the Psalm headings that mention David are based on Samuel. Therefore, Samuel is by far the most helpful and extensive source when considering the historical David. Before beginning the biography, McKenzie informs the reader of the basic nature of Samuel (and much Old Testament narrative). Samuel is a piecing together of several sources that are much later than David's time. These sources are not primarily concerned with painting an historical picture of David, rather with serving the purposes of their contemporary times. This is why we see such extensive apologies of David throughout the narrative. Clearly, the authors were concerned with painting David in a very positive light to serve their purposes. Therefore, the critical reader's responsibility is to differentiate between the figurative and mystical David to find the historical David. With this in mind, McKenzie begins his biography of David. With each chapter of David's life (and chapter of the book) McKenzie first retells the narrative according to Scripture. He then considers the historicity of this part of David's life. McKenzie first considers David's origin and youth. There is conflicting information about David's origins. Some places call him a shepherd, others a warrior. McKenzie concludes that "shepherd" is a metaphor for leading the people of Israel and Judah. A more historically reliable description is found in 1 Samuel 16:18, "I have seen a son of Jesse, the Bethlehemite, who knows how to play. He is a powerful nobleman, a warrior, eloquent, and a handsome man, and Yahweh is with him." This description goes against the young, gentle shepherd boy image that is usually assumed of David. Moving to the David and Goliath story, McKenzie sees this as legendary. It is likely that David distinguished himself in battle against the Philistines, pleasing Saul and propelling David into military leadership. David's continuing military leadership likely brought him a significant following among Saul's subjects, though not to the extent that the Bible says. Saul eventually perceived a threat by David, but before he could act, David escaped. Having escaped, David moves into the wilderness of Judah. There he gathered a following of fellow outlaws who terrorized the inhabitants of the Negev. David's most important single conquest during this period was the conquest of the Calebite chief, Nabal. David and Nabal's wife, Abigail (perhaps David's sister or half-sister) conspired to have Nabal killed, and David married Abigail. Thus, David assumed Nabal's wealth and power, effectively giving David control over Judah. David created an alliance with the Philistines by treaty. This combined force proved too great for Saul, bringing him down. After Saul's demise, David and his men provoked war against Ishbaal,

Saul's successor. This two-year war came to an abrupt end when David engineered the assassinations of Abner and Ishbaal, giving David control of both Judah and Israel. With this control of both Judah and Israel, David began consolidating these rules. He established the new capital and Jerusalem, and transferred the ark there. Typical of Middle Eastern rule, David had Saul's heirs executed, all except Meribball whom he kept under house arrest. In this, and other ways, David's rule was characteristic of Middle Eastern monarchy. These include a central capital with a royal palace and shrine to the king's deity, a bureaucratic government with a standing professional army, a harem, and a feudal system of social organization in which the king is the "supreme court" of the land. These are all things that Saul's rule did not have. For this reason, McKenzie considers David to be the first true king of Israel, not Saul. McKenzie now moves to consider the revolt of Absalom. The Bible goes to great lengths to portray David as being gentle and loving, so much so that he cannot punish his sons. This apologetic nature discredits its historicity. Instead, David had Absalom and Amnon killed because they were threats to his kingship. The narrative portrays the revolts as Yahweh's punishment for David's Bathsheba affair. This story, however, is a later addition. While the Bathsheba story claims it as the cause for the revolt, there is not such acknowledgement in the revolt narrative. The Bathsheba story was likely based on history, but did not happen before the revolt. Towards the end of David's life, the Bible depicts him as being mentally acute, ordering Solomon as his successor, and the execution of Joab for the assassinations of Abner and Amasa. 1 Kings 1 - 2 hint that David was actually senile in the end of his life. He likely was not aware that Solomon reined in his place, nor did he order the executions of Joab and Shimei. These executions were for Solomon's own political reasons. We also see that Bathsheba was intelligent, industrious, and devoted to her son. Looking back in 2 Samuel 11 - 12 we can see that she used these characteristics to maneuver her way into David's court, and that she likely had a far greater impact on the course of events during his reign than she is usually given credit for. McKenzie's portrait of David seems to be more historically reliable than the narrative of Samuel. He goes to great length to support his claims by a careful reading of the Scripture. He considers extensively the names and places to examine the historical plausibility. This careful examination is its greatest strength. McKenzie does not simply dismiss Samuel's David portrayal as implausible; rather he explains why it is historically implausible and suggested a more likely biography of David. This careful examination is also its greatest weakness. At the outset, McKenzie explained that he had little new insight to offer on David's life. Instead, his task was to make the wide-held scholarly views accessible to laypeople. His careful etymological examinations, and geographical study are hindrances for the average layperson. There are readers who will quickly dismiss it at the outset

because of its dismissal of the Biblical account of David. Those readers will not be convinced by any amount of scholarly examination. Then there are those readers who may be open to the possibility that the historical David is not the same as the David portrayed in Samuel. Those readers will be put off by McKenzie's over examination of the scholarly articles. All of this to say, McKenzie's biography of David does not serve as an accessible summation of scholarly opinions. Rather, it serves as a starting point for the scholarly arguments. Those who find this book helpful will be those who are interested in further study of David, not those who are interested in an easy-read, historical biography of David.

McKenzie offers a fun and popularized account of the life of David. However, the text he produces, far from being scholarly, often reads a bit like a tabloid account of King David. Deconstructing the book of Samuel, a Herculean and important task, has been accomplished elsewhere by serious scholars who offer very deep reconstructions of this most fascinating and contradictory character. Readers looking to explore the subject would do well to look for Professor B. Halpern's seminal work, "David's Secret Demons." While not as breezy in style, the book goes far deeper in uncovering its subject and will offer the reader far more food for thought. Therefore, if looking for an easy read, pick up McKenzie, but those with a serious interest in King David should put the time and effort into a more serious work. Please, take a look at Halpern; you won't regret it.

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