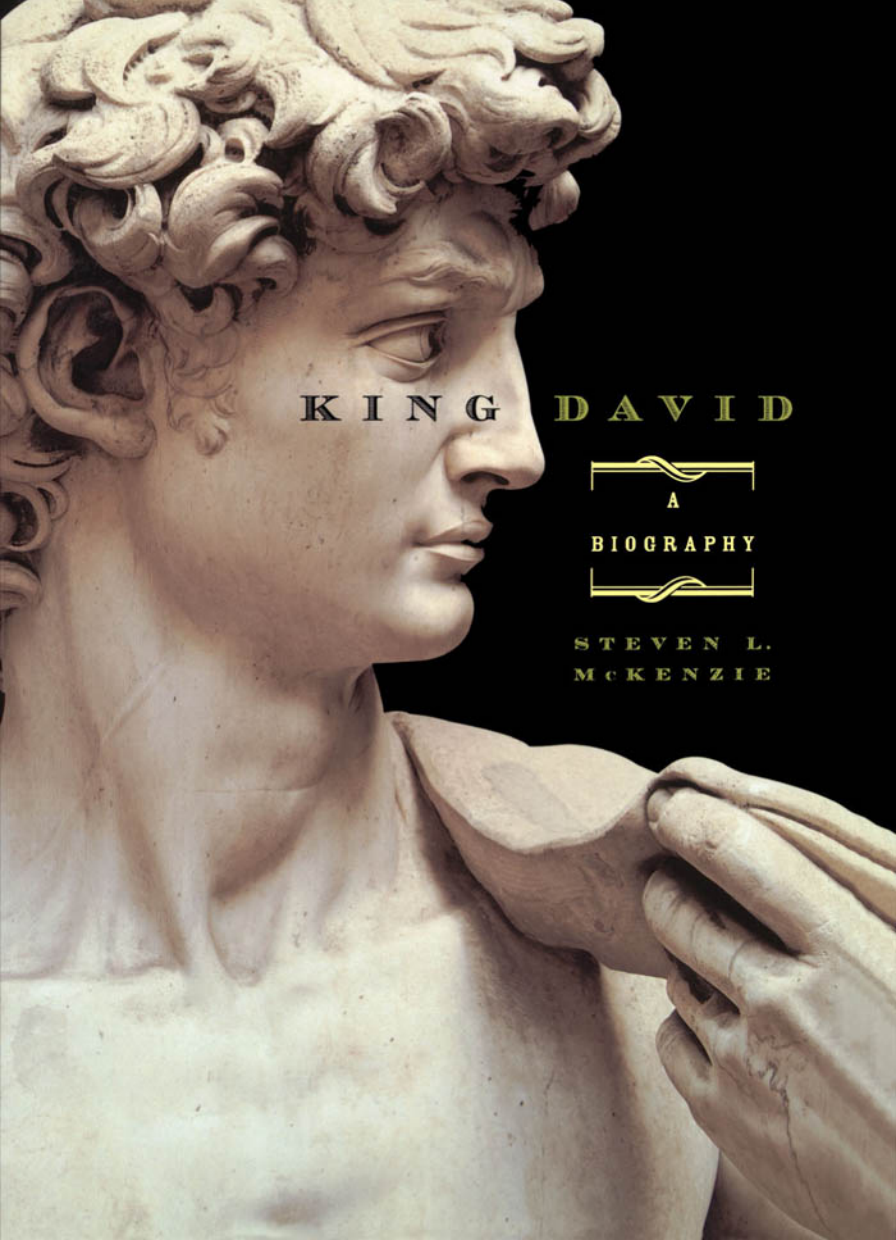

KING DAVID

A BIOGRAPHY

STEVEN L. McKENZIE

King David

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King David

A Biography

Steven L. McKenzie

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I am indebted also to my colleagues at Rhodes for their support on this project: to the Faculty Development Committee for a summer grant to work on David; to Susan Kus in anthropology for her advice on ethnoarchaeology; to Richard Batey of my own department of religious studies for his encouragement; and special thanks to my colleagues in Hebrew Bible, John Kaltner and Carey Walsh, for their shared expertise on specific parts of the manuscript. Karen Winterton, whose title of secretary belies her skill as an editor and literary critic, made helpful comments on an earlier incarnation of this manuscript. My friend Shaul Bar of the University of Memphis helped me with materials in modern Hebrew.

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Finally, I have been privileged over the years to sit at the feet of the leading scholars in various areas of study relating to ancient Israel. This book owes a debt to three of them in particular. Bill Dever's 1995 summer seminar on "Imagining the Past," sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities at the University of Arizona, helped me to set my image of David into the background provided by the archaeology of ancient Israel, in which Bill is the world's leading expert. Kyle McCarter was my first teacher at Harvard—in a course on textual criticism in the books of Samuel! His two-volume commentary on these books is a classic of biblical scholarship, and my dependence on it will be obvious throughout this biography. John Van Seters revolutionized my view of the Bible when I met him a decade ago in his NEH seminar on historiography at the University of North Carolina, and his combination of critical insight and sober judgment on both the historical and literary levels continues as the standard I strive to achieve. My interest in this volume in providing biographical information for David has led me to take a more positive view than John does of the potential historical value of the biblical material. He should not, therefore, be held responsible for any of my shortcomings or excesses. The same is true for Bill Dever and Kyle McCarter with regard to my statements about archaeology and the narrative of 1–2 Samuel. But this biography, whatever its failings or contributions, would never have existed without the work of these three scholars.

King David

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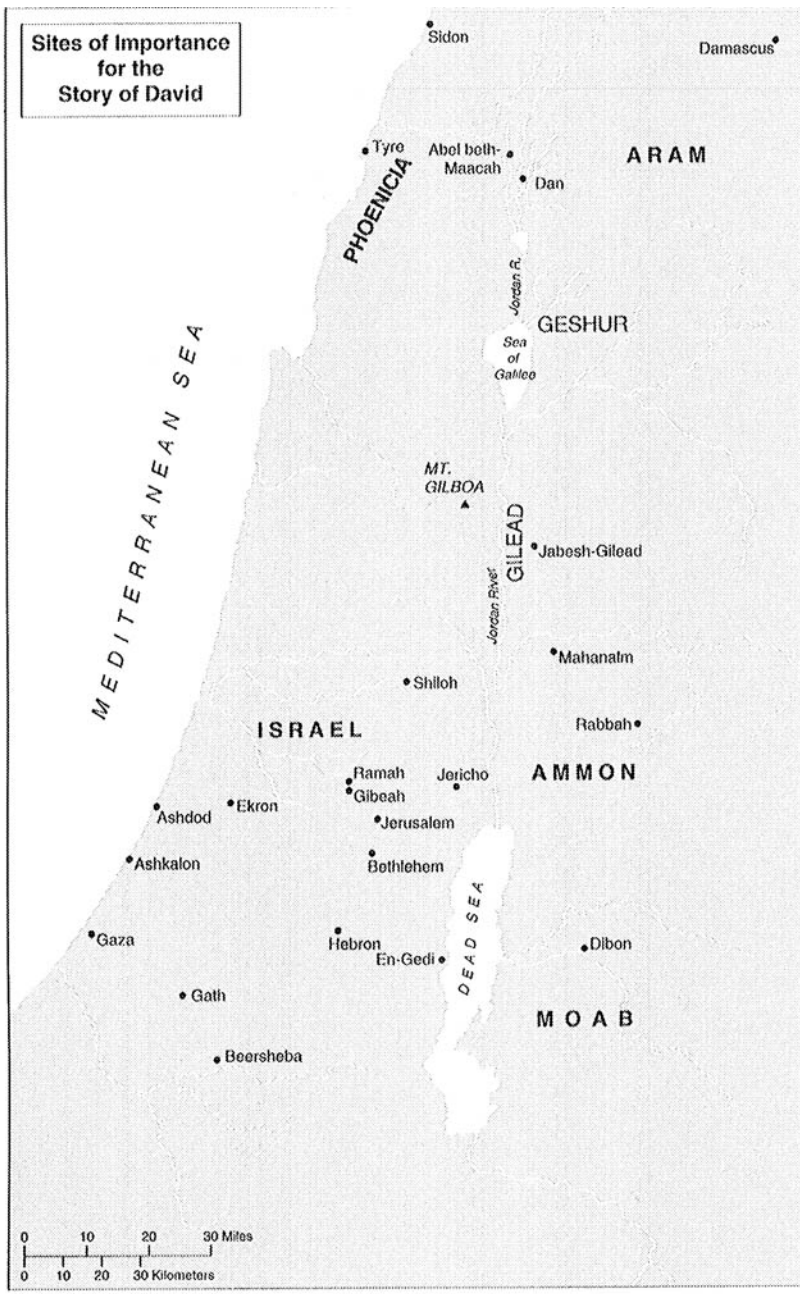
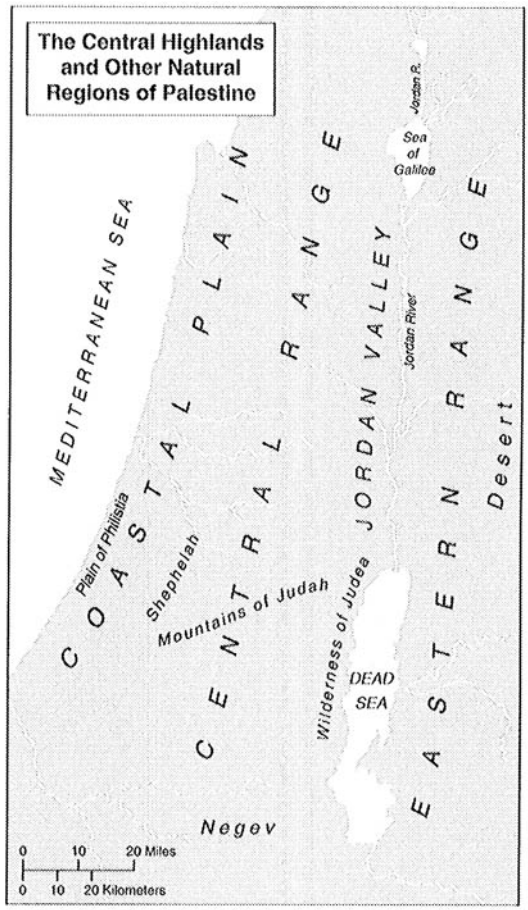
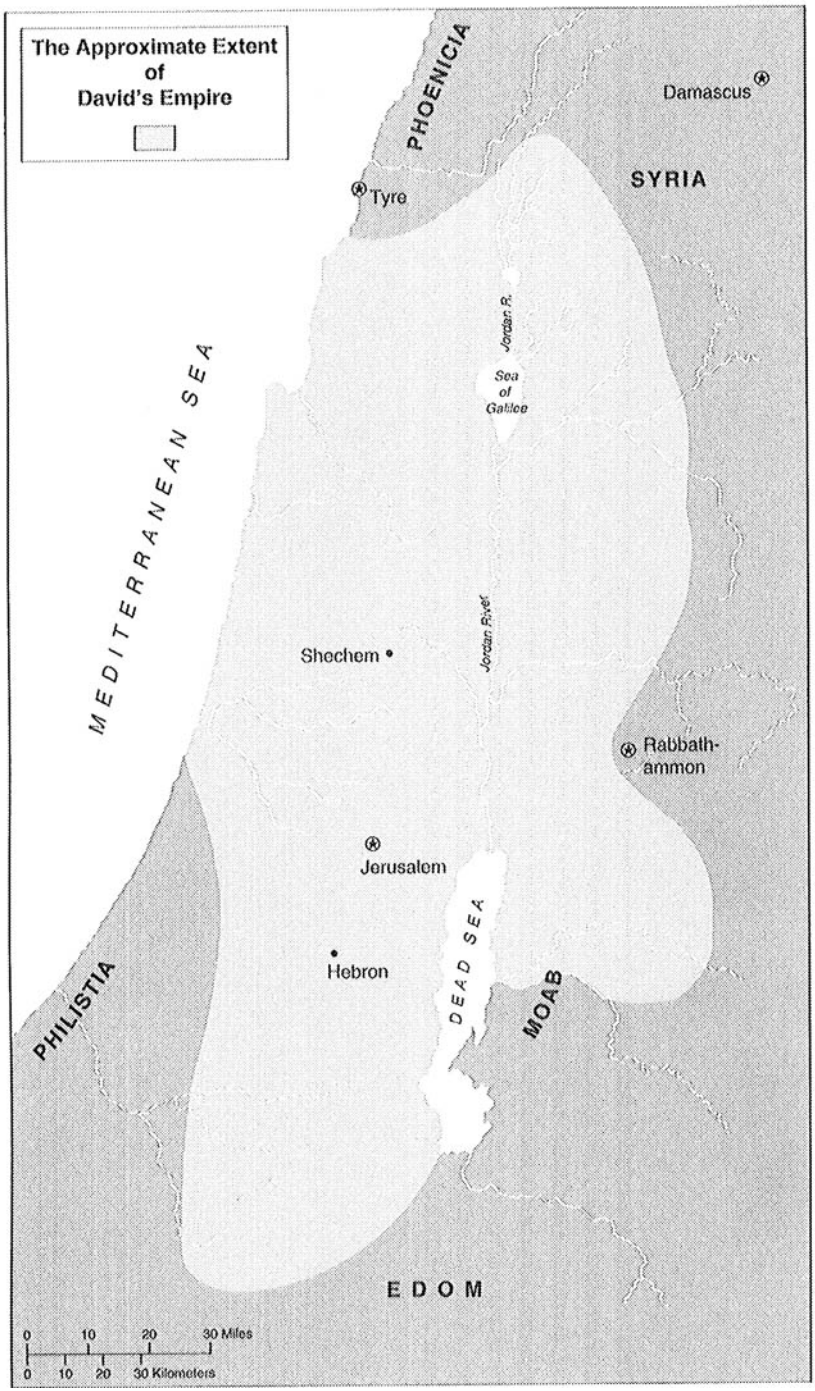
Map 1


Sites of Importance for the Story of David
Sidon
Damascus
Tyre
Abel beth-Maacah
Dan
ARAM
PHOENICIA
Jordan R.
GESHUR
Sea of Galilee
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
MT. GILBOA
GILEAD
Jabesh-Gilead
Jordan River
Mahanaim
Shiloh
ISRAEL
Rabbah
Ramah
Jericho
AMMON
Gibeah
Ashdod
Ekron
Jerusalem
Ashkalon
Bethlehem
DEAD SEA
Gaza
Hebron
En-Gedi
Dibon
Gath
MOAB
Beersheba
0 10 20 30 Miles
0 10 20 30 Kilometers

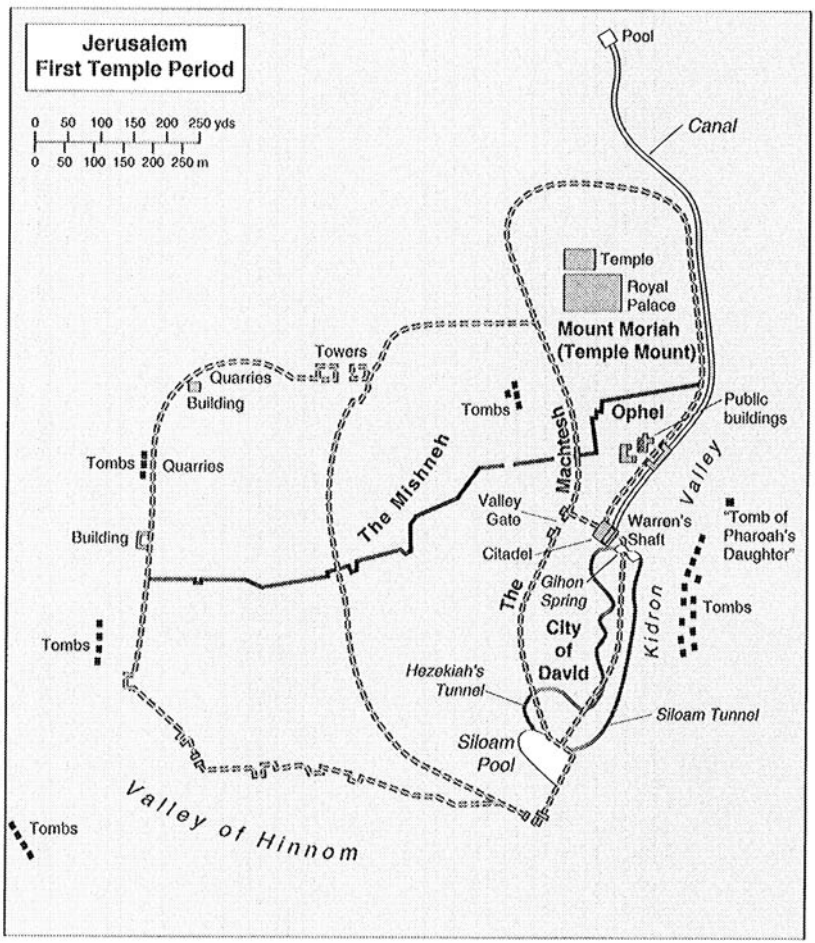
Map 2


The Central Highlands and Other Natural Regions of Palestine
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
COASTAL PLAIN
CENTRAL RANGE
JORDAN VALLEY
EASTERN RANGE
Desert
Plain of Philistia
Shephelah
Mountains of Judah
Wilderness of Judea
DEAD SEA
Sea of Galilee
Jordan R.
Jordan River
Negev
0 10 20 Miles
0 10 20 Kilometers

Map 3


The Approximate Extent of David's Empire
PHOENICIA
Damascus
SYRIA
Tyre
Jordan R.
Sea of Galilee
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Jordan River
Shechem
Rabbath-ammon
Jerusalem
DEAD SEA
Hebron
PHILISTIA
MOAB
EDOM
0 10 20 30 Miles
0 10 20 30 Kilometers

Map 4


Jerusalem
First Temple Period
0 50 100 150 200 250 yds
0 50 100 150 200 250 m
Pool
Canal
Temple
Royal Palace
Mount Moriah (Temple Mount)
Towers
Quarries
Building
Tombs
Ophel
Public buildings
Machtesh
Valley
Tombs
Quarries
The Mishneh
Valley Gate
Warren's Shaft
"Tomb of Pharoah's Daughter"
Building
Citadel
Gihon Spring
The
Kidron
Tombs
Tombs
City of David
Hezekiah's Tunnel
Siloam Tunnel
Siloam Pool
Valley of Hinnom
Tombs

Introduction

Images

The Need for a Biography of David

Sing the Man who Judah's Scepter bore,
In that right Hand which held the Crook before;
Who from best Poet, best of Kings did grow;
The two chief Gifts Heav'n could on Man bestow.

—Abraham Cowley, *Davideis*

Images of David in Literature

It is arguably the best known single work of art in the world, certainly the most famous sculpture. Michelangelo's *David* shows the power of an image (*Fig. 1*). No one knows what David looked like, though he is one of the most popular subjects in Western art.[1] Of the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of depictions of him, none has had the influence of Michelangelo's statue. Its size (over 15 feet high) is, ironically, Goliath-like. David's pose is graceful. His youthful, athletic body constitutes perfection. About to battle Goliath, his expression is humble but confident. This image has shaped people's ideas about David for generations and has come to represent the essence of the man.

Whereas artists use physical images to communicate ideas and inner qualities, writers use words and ideas to describe characters and create images of them in the mind. The literary images of David in Western civi-

lization are as diverse and powerful as the artistic ones. To begin with, there is the Bible, which devotes more space to David than to any other character. Moses and Jesus rival him for sheer number of pages until you add the Psalms. Then David wins hands down. But even without the Psalms, there is more about David's life than about the lives of the other biblical characters. Most of the "Books of Moses" is *torah*, "law" or "instruction." Similarly, most of the Gospels is teachings. David is no lawgiver or teacher but a man of deeds and actions. The David of the Bible is also a complex character. He is pious and faithful at times but is also capable of heinous crimes. He is a powerful and decisive man, except around his children, whom he cannot control.

The complexity of the biblical character helps to account for his popularity and diversity of portrayal in subsequent literature, especially during the Renaissance.[2] Shakespeare himself may have borrowed from the plot of the Bible's story of David, as the following comparison suggests.

> A young man, with a right to the throne, is set in conflict with a king who alternately flatters him and tries to kill him. The young man feigns madness. He comes upon his enemy, helpless and oblivious of his presence, but forgoes the perfect opportunity for revenge. This partial outline of the plot of Hamlet is also that of the biblical story of David, which likewise includes a ghost, fratricide, incest, and a dissembling avenger who invites his enemy to a feast so that he might be killed, unsuspecting and unprepared.[3]

Even today writers remain fascinated with David. Half a dozen new novels about him have appeared in just the last few years—some by world-class authors. We will look at these in the course of this book.

Writers have viewed David in different ways. For poets, he was the psalmist, inspired by God and inspiring them to the highest form of praise. Abraham Cowley's *Davideis* (1656), quoted at the beginning of this Introduction, was subtitled "A Sacred Poem."[4] Christopher Smart's "A Song to David" (1753) praised him as the ideal man:[5]

> Great, valiant, pious, good, and clean,
> Sublime, contemplative, serene,
> Strong, constant, pleasant, wise!
> Bright effluence of exceeding grace;

Best man!—the swiftness and the race,
The peril, and the prize! (lines 19–24)

Smart's "Song" was actually a defense of David. It was aimed at a group of people in the England of Smart's day who had attacked David's moral character even to the point of suggesting that his name be removed from Scripture. Smart upheld David's reputation and scolded his detractors:

O DAVID, highest in the list
Of worthies, on God's ways insist,
The genuine word repeat:
Vain are the documents of men,
And vain the flourish of the pen
That keeps the fool's conceit. (lines 289–294)

Robert Browning's "Saul" (1845) portrayed David as a psalmist in a more intimate way.[6] Writing in the first person, Browning described David's feelings of awe and devotion for Saul when he played the lyre for him the first time. David's humility and innocence stand out.

he spoke not, but slow
Lifted up the hand slack at his side, till he laid it with care
Soft and grave, but in mild settled will, on my brow: thro' my hair
The large fingers were pushed, and he bent back my head, with kind power—
All my face back, intent to peruse it, as men do a flower.
Thus held he me there with his great eyes that scrutinized mine—
And oh, all my heart how it loved him! but where was the sign?
I yearned—"Could I help thee, my father, inventing a bliss,
I would add, to that life of the past, both the future and this;
I would give thee new life altogether, as good, ages hence,
As this moment—had love but the warrant, love's heart to dispense!"
(lines 226–236)

For some, poets and prose writers alike, David was primarily a champion. His victory over Goliath was the triumph of truth, beauty, and virtue over hideous evil. According to Michael Drayton's "David and Goliath" (1630), David was God's "most deare delight" (line 31), "this holy Youth so

humble," "so wonderously faire" (lines 192, 723).[7] And the slave poet Phillis Wheatley in "Goliath of Gath" (1772) called him "the wond'rous hero" with "warlike courage far beyond his years" (lines 73, 44).[8] Ann Fairbairn's novel *Five Smooth Stones* (1966) defined Goliath, the evil enemy, as racism. Her hero was David Champlin, a warrior for civil rights.[9]

But for other writers, David was less heroic. Some depicted him as a man of unbridled and insatiable sexual appetite. When John Dryden in "Absalom and Achitophel" (1681) satirized King Charles II as promiscuous, he chose David for the caricature:[10]

> In pious times, ere priestcraft did begin,
> Before polygamy was made a sin;
> When man on many multiplied his kind,
> Ere one to one was cursedly confin'd;
> When nature prompted, and no law denied
> Promiscuous use of concubine and bride;
> Then Israel's monarch after Heaven's own heart,
> His vigorous warmth did variously impart
> To wives and slaves; and, wide as his command,
> Scatter'd his Maker's image thro' the land
> Michal, of royal blood, the crown did wear;
> A soil ungrateful to the tiller's care:
> Not so the rest; for several mothers bore
> To godlike David several sons before. (lines 1–14)

In this century, D. H. Lawrence's *David: A Play* (1926) used David as a way of exploring his own ideas about different kinds of love.[11] Casting David in his own image (same first name, red hair, and all), Lawrence described his relationships with Saul, Jonathan, and Michal. One of the most recent novels about David, Allan Massie's *King David* (1995) similarly paints David as a very active sexual being with lovers of both genders.[12]

Other modern novelists have described David in a much more negative way, as someone who lusted not just for sexual fulfillment but for power and control. More than that, they see his personality as thoroughly malignant—cruel and manipulative. William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) may have begun this trend in the present century.[13] He built the character of Thomas Sutpen on the model of David as cold and ruthless. More

recently, the German writer Grete Weil empathized with Michal's loneliness and isolation and blamed it on David's callousness. In her *The Bride Price* (1991) she has Michal say, "[David] became a hero and a hero is what I got for a husband in the end, though I had wished for a singer."[14] For Torgny Lindgren, the leading novelist of Sweden, David was worse than indifferent; he was devious and mean. In his *Bathsheba* (1989) he writes, "Holiness has made King David very cunning and shrewd."[15] Lindgren's Bathsheba learns from David and then surpasses him in shrewdness, manipulating all the major events of his reign.

There are many more literary works about David. We will survey some of them in future chapters. But these samples indicate the great interest generated by the biblical story of David as well as the diversity of characterization it has inspired.

The Quest for the Historical David

Given this literary preoccupation with David and the wide disagreement about his character, one would expect to find many biographies of David. But that is not the case. There are, to be sure, works about David that describe themselves as biographies. But their perspective is almost always inspirational rather than historical. What their authors really want to know is what made David "a man after God's own heart." In David they hope to isolate those personal qualities that are especially pleasing to God so that they and their readers can cultivate them in their lives.[16] Of those works that are not inspirational, some are in need of updating and the others focus more on the setting of the times than on David per se.[17]

The quest of this book is strictly historical. We will read the Bible not for its model of David as a religious hero nor for the artistry of its story about him, but for the historical information about him that it may provide. The Bible is, of necessity, the primary source about David's life. But we will analyze it critically using the best methods of biblical scholarship for discerning history. We will look to sources outside of the Bible, such as those uncovered by archaeology, to fill in the historical and social background, from the details of daily living to the actions typically undertaken by Middle Eastern kings. My purpose is not simply to retell the biblical story but to recount the events and details of David's life to the extent that

they can be surmised from the available sources. This includes matters such as his real character and personality, physical appearance, deeds and accomplishments, and true motives and ambitions.

The Challenges of a Biography of David

Trying to reconstruct any event from the past is a lot harder than it first appears. Take the JFK assassination. It was only thirty-five years ago, had plenty of eyewitnesses, and was captured on film. Yet, the controversy surrounding it appears to be endless. It may be impossible now to know exactly what happened, much less the motives and intentions of the people involved.

Historians have long realized that every account of the past involves interpretation. The greater the distance from the past to the present, the greater the role played by interpretation will be. This is particularly significant for a biography of David, because the distance between his time and the present is considerable, some three thousand years. One scholar has referred to the historical image of David as a hologram—a likeness that is fleeting, indistinct, and varies according to the spectator's point of view.[18] Others are more skeptical; they conclude that there is no substance to any image of David because he never existed historically. This is an issue I will discuss in the first chapter. But it is important to admit at the outset that our biography of David is actually an interpretation of the historical character—a hologram or a portrait, if you will.

A further challenge for a biography of David is presented by the abundance of material about him. There is more detailed information available about David than about any other person who lived so long ago. The challenge comes in trying to separate historical fact from its literary presentation. How much of the David material is history and how much story? To what extent is the historical David influenced by theology? To what extent is his story fictional?

Biblical scholarship has made it clear that the Bible cannot be taken at face value as history. This is not to say anything against the Bible. Its human authors were simply more concerned with theology than with history. But modern scholars have developed critical methods of analysis that can be used to delve beneath the literary and theological presentations of David in search of historical information. It is the use of these critical

methods that distinguishes this biography from most other works about David. I take the Bible seriously—but also critically—as a source of historical information.

While some of the conclusions about David's actions and character may seem shocking to lay readers, they are "old hat" to scholars. Part of my purpose in writing this book is to make available to a broad audience views that most scholars have long held. Thus, a significant part of this biography consists of conclusions reached by other scholars using methods of biblical criticism. I have assembled them into a comprehensive history of David's life. I have tried to put them together in a form that is easy to read. I have limited technical discussions to the footnotes and kept those to a minimum. But I also want to give credit where it is due. That is the reason for the extensive bibliography at the end. Of course, I have a few new ideas of my own to add. But the portrait of David that is painted here, at least in its broad strokes, is one that is widely endorsed among scholars.

Prospectus

The plan of this book is simple. Chapter One discusses the nature of sources outside of the Bible for David's life. They are basically two: inscriptions and the results of archaeology. Is there evidence from these sources to indicate that David was a real person and not just the invention of the biblical writers? If so, what can they tell us about his life, and how do they relate to the biblical material? Chapter Two focuses on the Bible. It describes the different parts of the Bible that deal with David and their historical value. It also lays out the approach that will be used in the rest of the book to mine the biographical information about David. Chapters Three through Nine are the biography proper. David's life is divided into periods, and the information about him from the Bible and other sources is integrated to reconstruct his activities in each period. The final chapter brings the results of the individual chapters together into a single biographical synthesis of the life of King David.

One final note. Since the Bible is our primary source for David's life, you may find it helpful to look over the section of the Bible about him in 1 Samuel 16—1 Kings 2 before beginning this biography. An outline of this section may be found in Chapter Two. It may also be helpful to have a copy of the Bible handy for reference while you read.

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I

Was There a King David?

Extrabiblical Sources

"Do we, the late-born, really know anything at all about someone who lived in the past?"

—Grete Weil, *The Bride Price*

The November 21, 1997, issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* contained an unusual article. The *Chronicle* monitors trends in higher education, typically reporting on matters like tuition costs, tenure, and the impact of technology. The lead for this article on the cover read, "Did King David Exist? Bitter Divisions Among Biblical Scholars." Even more provocative was the one-line synopsis: "Biblical scholars get nasty in a transatlantic debate over whether King David existed." The article lived up to its billing, with quotations from biblical scholars and archaeologists characterizing one another as "fundamentalist," "minimalist," and "anti-Zionist," and each others' views as "scandalous," "absurd," and "insanity."[1]

The heat of this debate reflects the emotion that many people feel—one way or the other—about the Bible and its main characters. But beyond the emotion and personal conflicts, the article also makes clear the two major questions that must be answered before a biography of David can begin: (1) Do sources outside of the Bible indicate that David really existed or give additional information about him? and (2) How may the Bible be

used to reconstruct David's life? These two questions are the topics of this chapter and the next.

More than a decade before the firestorm of controversy erupted on the pages of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a scholar penned these words in an article titled "The Historical David":

> The Bible is our only source of information about David. No ancient inscription mentions him. No archaeological discovery can be securely linked to him. The quest for the historical David, therefore, is primarily exegetical.[2]

This statement may seem surprising. You would think that a person as famous and active as David is in the Bible would have left plenty of indications of his historical existence for archaeologists to dig up. You would also expect to find him mentioned frequently in the records of the ancient countries he conquered or had dealings with.

The scholar who wrote those words, P. Kyle McCarter, is not one of the so-called minimalists who deny David's historical existence. Yet he must concede that there is little concrete information about David outside of the Bible. It is easy to see how one might suspect that there never was such a person and that the story about him in the Bible is fictional. But McCarter and others like him also have good reasons for believing in a historical David. McCarter's statement, therefore, provides a useful structure for surveying the evidence outside of the Bible that bears, pro and con, on the question of the David of history.

"No ancient inscription mentions him"

During the past two centuries, thousands of ancient documents from hundreds of sites throughout the Middle East have been excavated. They provide information about history, politics, religion, laws, customs, and almost every other aspect of life in the ancient world. However, the vast majority of these documents have come from Egypt and Iraq (ancient Mesopotamia), both of which were in stages of rebuilding in 1000 B.C.E., the approximate time of David's reign according to the Bible's chronology. This means that their contact with other countries was limited during this period. In Mesopotamia this era has been called a "dark age," and we have fewer records than for other periods.

The relative paucity of documents from this period may help to explain why no mention of David was found for such a long time. But in the summer of 1993 he finally showed up. The occurrence of David's name in a newly discovered inscription led to the publication of new readings for two previously known inscriptions. Thus, McCarter's statement that "no ancient inscription mentions [David]" is no longer true.

The Tel Dan Stele

The new discovery was a piece of an inscribed monument or "stele." It was found by accident, as such things usually are, at an archaeological dig in the ruin ("tel") of the ancient city of Dan in northern Israel. It had been reused as building material for a later wall and was near the wall's base. You can imagine the excitement of the person who found it. She was walking along looking at the ground when something about that one stone caught her eye. She knelt to take a closer look and noticed the lines of markings cut into the rock. She recognized it as writing of some kind and immediately called the project director.

The fragment measured 32 by 22 cm. at its widest point. It was broken on all sides except the right margin, so the size of the original monument could not be determined. It was made of basalt, which was a very expensive stone in antiquity. Since it would have been costly to produce, the monument could not have been erected by just anybody. It was most likely the work of a king (*Fig. 2*).

There were thirteen lines of writing preserved on the fragment in an early form of the alphabet. The letters were clear and elegantly inscribed. The language was instantly recognized as Aramaic, the mother tongue of ancient Syria. As with Hebrew, the writing went from right to left. It was the ninth line that caught the collective eye of the first readers. There were the consonants that spelled out the name of David: DWD.

But the name did not stand alone. It was part of a larger word rendered "house of David." This was one source of the controversy generated by the inscription in the first year after its discovery. The occurrence of David's name was not as obvious as it had appeared at first. The same letters used to write his name could have other meanings as well, especially since Aramaic, like ancient Hebrew, was written without vowels. One common pro-