

David Chapter 1

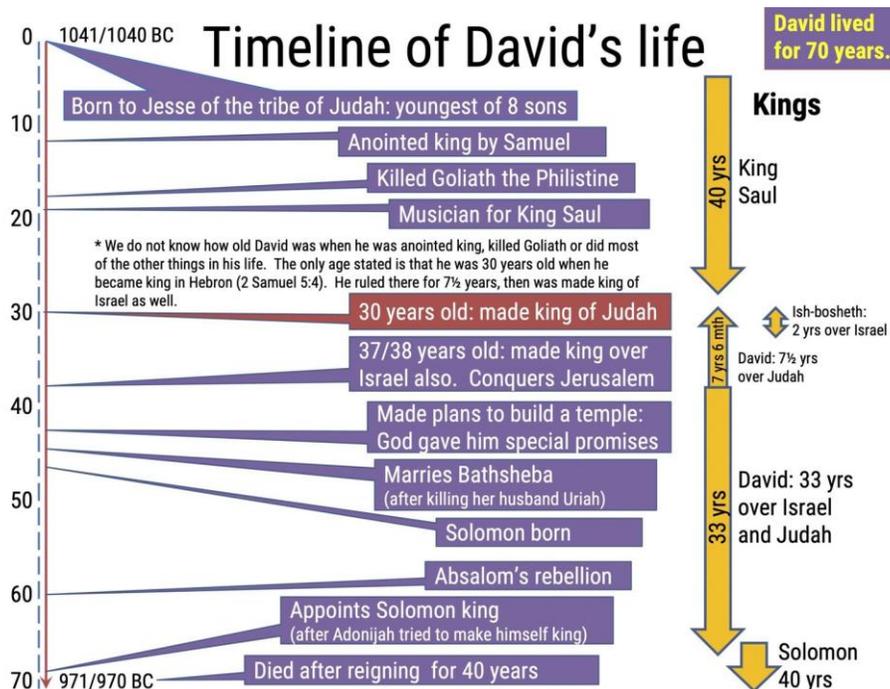
Background and David the Shepherd Boy

Although David is arguably the person in the Old Testament with the most complete biography, we know very few details of his childhood and young life. We can glean quite a bit about the way he grew up and how it may have shaped him into what he became by analysis of events in his later life.

When we study any character in the Old Testament, we need to be careful of a couple of things:

- 1 We need to put our cultural and chronological biases aside. In other words, we need to guard against our “chronological chauvinism” as historians refer to the tendency for us to project our cultural, moral and ethical standards onto whatever time frame and cultural milieu the subject under study lived in.
- 2 We need to try to understand the historical setting of the person, and for that we can and should make use of extra-Biblical references when possible.
- 3 We should not read Old Testament narrative as we would a modern history treatise. Events are often not recorded in chronological order, and different scribes may refer to the same event or person from a different perspective. Thus we can read David’s story in 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 Kings and I Chronicles – each narrative slightly different from the other. For this look at David’s life, we will focus on 1 and 2 Samuel.
- 4 We need to look for the lessons we can take from our historical person’s life and maybe apply in our own lives. Throughout the series narrative I shall refer to specific Scripture passages – I encourage you to flip to those for a better understanding of the study.

A timeline of David’s life.



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The historical setting.

David was king over Israel in the time period 1010 to 990 BC. He was born in or about 1041/1040 to Jesse and Nitzvet¹, the youngest of 8 brothers. Nitzvet was probably Jesse's youngest wife, as the other seven brothers were all quite a bit older than David.

Israel at the time was a pastoral nation – or rather a loose collection of tribes. They were new to the idea of a central political structure (king Saul). Over the approximately 300 years preceding the monarchy, local leaders arose to deal with crises as they developed. These were the “judges”. The Hebrew word used points more to a military leader than a legal/judicial position. Saul was the first central chieftain or king and he reigned for 40 years.

As far as technology is concerned, Israel appears to have been out of the mainstream of developments. The Bronze Age was ending, and the Iron Age was just starting off. Iron and steel technology developed first in countries to the north and east of Canaan (Persia, today Iran, and Anatolia, today Turkey). The technology was adopted by other peoples of the area, notably for our purposes the Philistines. There was a long overlap between the collapse of the Bronze Age and the flowering of the Iron Age, as we can deduce from the narrative in 1 Samuel 16 onwards. At the time of Saul, the Israelites were dependent on their Philistine neighbours for blacksmith services (1 Sam 13:19). Edged weapons seem to have been in short supply as a result (1 Sam 13:22).

Culturally, the Israelites and surrounding peoples lived a hard and, for our sensibilities, brutal life. Human life was not viewed with the same value as we do today, justice was quick, brutal and often misplaced.

David, the Shepherd Boy. For reading: 1 Samuel 16 and 17.

The first time we meet David is in 1 Samuel 16:12. The event is a sacrifice feast Samuel arranged at the house – probably a small settlement – of Jesse. The LORD had instructed Samuel to go and anoint “a man after God's own heart” as the next king over Israel, as Saul had not made the grade as king (1 Sam 16:1). Saul must have exercised a lot of control over the people at the time, because Samuel was worried that, should Saul find out about his quest, he would have him, Samuel, killed (1 Sam 16:2, 3).

A ruse was developed, whereby Samuel took a heifer and under the pretense of going to prepare an offering at Jesse's house, went to perform the anointing. Even when he arrived at Bethlehem, there is a hint that the population lived, not so much in awe of the king, but in fear of him and anyone who could possibly be representing him (1 Sam 16:4, 5).

The narrative of the anointing episode is found in 1 Sam 16:5 to 13.

For pause and reflection: Did David know why he was being anointed? Did he realise that outpouring of oil signified that he was destined to be the next king over Israel? What do you think? Considering

¹ Not named in the Bible, but named in the Talmud.

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the narrative found in the rest of chapters 16 and 17, justify your answer – and keep the notes because we will come back to this later.

The events related in chapter 16:14 onwards appear to be scrambled in their chronology. If David had been in Saul's service as his "musical therapist" one would think that, when David turns up and offers to fight Goliath, that Saul would recognise him. Yet there is no hint of recognition in 1 Sam 17:32, 33 and 55 to 58.

If we read the text in the sequence as per the table below, the chronology makes more sense.

If you wonder how it might fit together, try reading the passages in the order below:

- 1 Samuel 16:1-13. Samuel anoints David to be king.
- 1 Samuel 17:1-54. David fights Goliath
- 1 Samuel 17:55-18:4. is partly a summary of David's confrontation with Goliath and partly new information
- 1 Samuel 16:14-23. David called to help Saul through music
- 1 Samuel 18:5-30. David as an army leader and national hero which causes Saul to hate him

For ease of reference, we will stick to the sequence as recorded in 1 Samuel 16 and 17.

1 Samuel 16:14-23.

Saul appears to have suffered from depression and paranoia. Which is not all that surprising, seeing that Samuel had told him he would not be the monarch who would leave a dynasty to rule Israel. Another would be king after him – one of his neighbours. (Ch 15:23-28).

When these moods took Saul, he appears to have become violent at times (1 Sam 18:10). Music was a therapy, and David was recommended as the one to play for Saul. He did that as a young boy, before Goliath, and also later, when he was already a warrior in Saul's service (chapter 18).

David had learned to play the harp or lyre (a smaller, U-shaped form of harp, and more likely David's instrument because of ease of carrying and storing) during his time as a shepherd. Sheep will imprint on a human who cares for them – getting to know the voice or other sound made regularly and consistently. Playing the harp or lyre would have created this effect on the sheep David was looking after, and they would have followed him. (Ref also John 10:3-5, when Jesus uses the analogy of the shepherd and the sheep). The idea of herding sheep by chasing them came later, when flock sizes increased, and shepherds were not living with their sheep full time.

David also probably composed songs to sing or hum to the sheep. The human voice has a calming effect on herd animals – there are many stories of cowboys in the Old West singing to cattle at night while on a cattle drive.

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David was proficient and known as a good musician (ch 16:18). It seems that even at that time his courage was attested to, and that was before he confronted Goliath.

David entered Saul's service and the music soothed the troubled king. But even then, Saul had violent episodes (Ch 18:10).

For pause and reflection: David played the lyre to soothe a troubled man. What can you do to comfort someone you may encounter who needs help? Especially in these times of hermit living. Reach out on the phone? Send a card expressing support?

1 Samuel chapter 17.

The Israelites were at almost constant war with the Philistines. Although mentioned some 152 times in 1 Samuel, the Septuagint refers to "those of another tribe" rather than to Philistines directly. Whatever their origin might have been we know they terrorised Israel over many decades. During one such war, Saul and the Israelites warriors (if one could call them that, seeing they were a rag-tag collection of farmers and herdsman) were camped in the Valley of Elah, confronting the Philistine army across the valley. All able-bodied men had been summoned, including David's older brothers.

The Philistine warrior Goliath challenged any Israelite to fight him, and the winner of the fight would by extrapolation allow his army to be considered the victors of the battle. The idea of having two men – the champions – or a small "battle group" fight it out instead of entire armies survived well into the Middle Ages. It is a practice that would make a lot of sense to a pastoral nation – the men who survive would be available to cultivate the land. If too many were killed in battle, famine would follow – even for the victors.

David comes on the scene at the end of forty days of Goliath taunting Israel (1 Sam 17:16). We know the rest of the story, but I want to pause at verses 34 to 37 and dig a bit deeper.

David is typically portrayed as the shepherd boy. The one who could play the lyre or harp, sing and compose songs and was an expert marksman with a sling. The lyre fits in with the shepherd image – sheep tend to imprint on familiar, repetitive sound. By playing the harp, and maybe softly singing, David could entice the sheep to follow him, rather than having to drive them. David was used to the solitude of his task and would have had lots of time to reflect on God – keep in mind that he would not have had any formal theological training. He only knew the oral history of his people and their special relationship with El Elohim, God Almighty.

But his report to Saul regarding the lion and the bear should give us pause. In the area of Canaan (we would refer to the Middle East today) the ranges of these two carnivores overlapped. The Asiatic lion is still around – a small number of them survive in the Gir National Park in India – at the last census about 650 of them. They are about the size of the Central African lion, that is a bit smaller than the Southern African lion. But not a pussycat.

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The Syrian brown bear was indigenous to the Middle East. It survives in countries to the north of Israel but is extirpated in Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian territories. In David's time it was likely well represented in the area. It is slightly smaller than a North American brown bear. Also not a teddy bear.

As a teenager, David confronted both and, in his own words, killed them. His weapons would have consisted of his sling and possibly a sharpened stick, the end maybe fire-hardened somewhat, to serve as a primitive spear.

This report by David leads us to think that he was brave to the point of foolishness, very quick on his feet and had an absolute trust in God to protect and aid him.

Tackling a lion and bear seems foolishly brave, but to tackle a trained giant of a warrior is a different matter, one would think.

The description of Goliath's armour and weapons confirms the time epoch as being in the transition between the bronze age and the iron age. Although his armour was made of more malleable bronze, the cutting edge weapons (the spear point is mentioned) was of iron – much harder and less likely to bend or chip in combat. His sword is not referenced here, but we know from a later incident that David took the sword for his own; we can safely assume it was an iron sword.

The outcome of the fight is known. A couple of things bear deeper thought:

- 1 David refused the armour Saul offered him (again, made of bronze) and relied solely on the weapons/tools he was used to. His sling and his shepherd staff (v40). His main "weapon" was his total trust in God (v37).
- 2 David picked five stones from the stream as he crossed to fight Goliath. Maybe this was merely a precaution in case the first stone did not hit as intended, but there is some speculation that it was because Goliath had four brothers. We can read about three of them in 1 Chronicles 20:4-8.
- 3 David killed Goliath. The stone to his head probably knocked him down and out, or at least stunned him. The decapitation was not only insurance – the final death blow – but also symbolic of total victory.
- 4 The Israelites defeated the demoralised Philistine army.

For pause and reflection:

David relied on God and on the tools that he was used to, rather than trying something new in a time of stress. Many people, in this time of the pandemic stress, have turned away from relying on the "tools" they were familiar with – prayer, worship, fellowship – and adopted new "tools" – drugs, alcohol, binge movie watching – in trying to cope. What are you relying on – God and the familiar "tools", or...??

David knew he probably needed only one stone to knock the giant down, but he had a reserve. He was prepared for the unexpected. We are in an uncertain time and things can change rapidly from getting better to getting worse. Are you prepared (mentally and spiritually) for the unexpected?

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David displayed a gory trophy of his victory for all to see. We also have a trophy of victory in Christ – not gory, but joyful and triumphant. Can your neighbours or those whom you encounter daily see your trophy of victory - Christ's love - shine in and through you?

End of chapter 1

Hennie Prinsloo, North Vancouver, April 2021.