

R410/511
Professor Weitzman

King David in Myth and History

A wily warrior also known as Israel's greatest poet, a ruler chosen by God who commits murder and adultery, King David is one of the most complex figures to emerge from the Bible. This course explores David as both an historical figure and mythical character. What do scholars know about the real David and what impact did he have on history? Does the story of David earn its reputation as one of the great masterpieces of world literature? And how did the highly flawed king at its center become the idealized figure celebrated as the author of the Psalms and the ancestor of the messiah? In seeking answers to these questions, we will address several larger issues: the reliability of the Bible as an historical source; its nature as a work of literary art; and the meanings projected onto the Bible by later interpreters and story-tellers.

How to be in touch with me

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Required Texts

- 1) Harper Collins Study Bible
- 2) Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman , The Bible Unearthed :
Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its
Sacred texts
- 3) Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative
- 4) Course Reader (available at Collegiate Copies)

Course Requirements and Expectations

Your final grade will be based on three criteria

- 1) Attendance and active participation in class discussions are absolutely essential to this class (10%). Bring your Bible to every course meeting. Extremely active participation can boost your final grade; excessive absence (more than one unexcused absence) will lower it.

- 2) Four Written Exercises (first two papers, 10% each; second two, 20% each)
- 3) Final Take Home Exam (30%)

Graduate Students in r-511 will have a slightly different set of requirements. See Instructor after the first day of class.

Important: In your final writing exercise (due December 3) you will explore the characterization of David in one of the works below (in works like Absalom, Absalom, your focus will be a main character modelled on David). Your essay should answer the following. What is this David (or David-figure) like—what are his leading characteristics and flaws? How does he relate to others, especially his wives? What does the author use from the original story of David in 1-2 Samuel to construct her or his portrait of the king, and what has the author invented? How has this David been adapted to the present or to the author’s literary goals?

It is best that you order your chosen novel at a local bookstore, but you may also use the library copy (most of the books below have been placed on reserve in the Main Library). Further instructions will be given later in the semester.

- 1) William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom (copies available in campus bookstores; for those unafraid of a challenging read)
- 2) Stefan Heym, The King David Report (PT2617.E948 K513 1973)
- 3) Joseph Heller, God Knows (PS3515.E325 G58 1984)
- 4) D. H. Lawrence, David: a Play (PR6023.A9 A19 1999)
- 5) Allan Massie King David (PR6063.A79 K56 1995)
- 6) Andre Gide, “Saul” in My Theatre; Five Plays and an Essay (PQ2613.I2 A26). Students who opt for this play may compare and contrast this work with Gide’s shorter play “Bathsheba” in the same volume.
- 7) The figure of David in the poems of the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai (essay must cover at least three poems).
- 8) D Pinski, “King David and his Wives,” in The Dybbuk and other great Yiddish Plays (PJ5191.E5 L25)
- 9). M L’Engle, Certain Women (PS 3523.E57 C47 1992)

Semester Schedule

Part I. Reading David’s Story

Week of September 3

T Introduction

R The Rise of the Israelite Monarchy

Read: 1 Samuel 1-8

For Thursday: What are the arguments in favor of kingship according to 1 Samuel 1-8? What are the arguments against it?

Week of September 10

T The Rise and Fall of Saul

Read: 1 Samuel 9-15

What recommends Saul for kingship? Why does God later reject him?

R The Rise of David

Read: 1 Samuel 16-27; and for background on the Philistines, go to www.bga.nl/en/articles/filist1.html.

Where do scholars think the Philistines came from?

Despite his reputation as the slayer of the Philistine Goliath, David seems to have enjoyed a close relationship with the Philistines. What is the nature of that relationship, and how does 1 Samuel account for (or excuse) it?

Week of September 17

T David and the House of Saul

Read: 1 Samuel 28-2 Samuel 10

First Writing Exercise. By the right of succession, Saul's sons, especially Jonathan, Ishbaal, and Mephiboshet, should have become king after him (indeed, Ishbaal does become king for a while). What happens to these sons? Does David have any responsibility for their demise? (due Sept 17)

R David and Jerusalem

Read: Reread 1 Samuel 4-6 and read 2 Samuel 6-10, and 24.

Scholars believe that 1 Samuel 4-6 and 2 Samuel 6 once existed as an independent story that they refer to as the "Ark Narrative." How is this story similar to the story of Cyrus as told in the Cyrus Cylinder (pp. 2-3 in your reader)?

Week of September 24

T Sin and Civil War
Read: 2 Samuel 11-19

R David's Death and Solomon's Succession
Read: 2 Samuel 20-1 Kings 3.

Part II. Fact and Fiction in the Life of David

Week of October 1

T Unearthing the Bible.
Read: Unearthing the Bible, 4-24, 72-122

What does archaeology reveal about the Bible as an historical source? What does it tell us, or not tell us, about the Bible's description of early Israelite history?

R Digging up David
Read: Unearthing the Bible, 123-62, 229-40; Reader, p. 4-5 ("House of David" Inscription). For the challenge of making sense of an ancient inscription, see www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/wsrp/educational_site/yourself/chicken.shtml

Is there evidence of David's kingdom? According to Finkelstein and Silberman, what was the true character of this "kingdom"?

Week of October 8

T 1-2 Samuel as Propaganda
Read: Reader pp. 6-19; Azitawadda Inscription (handout)

How would you define propaganda? Would you classify the Azitawadda Inscription as propaganda? Do you agree with Whitlam's assertion that 1-2 Samuel is propaganda? What is its author trying to persuade you to believe?

R Counter-Spin in 2 Samuel

Second Writing Exercise. Is there any reason to believe that the biblical story of David in 1 Samuel-1 Kings was not written as royal propaganda? If you like, you may develop your argument through a comparison/contrast with the Azitawadda Inscription (due Oct 10).

Week of October 15

T The Art of Biblical Narrative

Read: Art of Biblical Narrative, 3-46; Genesis 37-39

Genesis 38 tells the story of David's ancestor Peretz? In light of Alter, how does this story relate to the stories that precede and follow it in Genesis 37 and 39?

R Convention and Creativity in David's Story

Read: Art of Biblical Narrative, 47-62; Reader, 21-31

What is a type-scene? According to Weitzman, how does the author of 2 Samuel manipulate a type scene to suggest changes in David's character?

Third Writing Exercise. In light of Alter's arguments, do you think that the term "fiction" is an appropriate term for 1-2 Samuel (to answer this question, you have will have to define what you understand by the term "fiction")? If so, identify what it is in David's story that supports this categorization? If not, how do you account for the "fictional" elements identified by Alter and how would you classify the narrative. In either case, focus your answer through an analysis of an individual episode (due Nov 5)

Part III. David as Myth and Symbol

Week of October 22

T Rewriting David

Read: 1 Chronicles 10-29; Unearthing the Bible, 296-313

How has 1 Chronicles revised David's character (pay close attention to both additions and subtractions)? Based on Unearthing the Bible, is there anything in this revision to suggest that it comes from the period after the Babylonian exile?

R David's Great Grandmother

Read: Book of Ruth; Nehemiah 13; Ezekiel 44:4-9.

Ruth purports to tell the story of one of David's ancestors, Ruth. Although it is set in the time before the monarchy, many scholars believe the story of Ruth was composed in the post-exilic period. Assuming this view to be correct, why do you think this story was written? Does it seem to speak to any issue of concern to the authors of Nehemiah 13 and Ezekiel 44, texts from this period?

Week of October 29

T David the Poet

Read: Reader, 33-49; Psalms 3, 34, 51, 52, , 54, 56 57, 59, 60; and note the images of David at prayer from the medieval Books of Hours at www.candesign.com/pwhaynes/psalms.html

Who originally wrote the Psalms and why? How did they come to be understood as the work of David? What does this reinterpretation tell us about the shifting significance of the Psalms?

What is it about the psalms listed above that suggested David as their author?

R No class today to give you time to work on your papers. In lieu of the class, however, you are required to attend a lecture at 7:30 pm on November 14 by an Israeli archaeologist on the archaeology of Jerusalem.

Week of November 5

T Discussion of Literary Analyses

R David the Prophet

Read: Reader, 45-58; and see www.cybercom.net/~htm/images/a-44.jpg

How did David come to be regarded as a prophet?

Week of November 12

T David and the Messiah

Read: 2 Samuel 7; Isaiah 44:24-45:17; Haggai 1-2; Reader, 60-84

How did David come to be perceived as the ancestor of the messiah? What other kinds of messiah were there in early Judaism?

R Jesus, son of David

Read: the Gospel of Matthew

How does the gospel of Matthew place Jesus in the tradition of the Davidic Messiah. Given this tradition, why does Jesus himself seem to call his Davidic ancestry into question (see Matt 22:41-45)?

Week of November 19

T Christian, Rabbinic and Muslim Portraits of David

Read: Reader, 85-93; and for a Muslim telling of David's story, see: www.angelfire.com/on/ummiby1/dawud.html

How does the Babylonian Talmud reshape the character of David. How does Muslim tradition? What in these portraits reflects earlier interpretive traditions and what seems new?

R David as Symbol

Read: Reader, 95-107.

When and how did the hexagram come to be seen as the shield of David? What does this symbol signify exactly and how has its significance changed? Why was it featured on the flag of the state of Israel?

No class the week of November 26 for Thanksgiving Break.

Week of December 3

T Discussion of Final Papers

Th David as Image. Guest Lecture by Dr. Daniel Unger. Take-home exams will be distributed.

Week of December 10

No class Tuesday to allow you to work on take-home exams, due Dec 12 in class.

1 Samuel 17:4, 7, 49: And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath of Gath. . . the shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam. . . David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead. . .

2 Samuel 21: 19: Elhanan son of Jaareoregim, from Bethlehem, killed Goliath of Gath, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam.

Excerpts from Clinton's "Broken Spirit" speech, September 11, 1998

I agree with those who have said that in my first statement after I testified I was not contrite enough. I don't think there is a fancy way to say that **I have sinned**...But I believe that to be forgiven, more than sorrow is required – at least two more things. First, genuine repentance -- a determination to change and to repair breaches of my own making. I have repented. Second, **what my Bible calls a "broken spirit"**; an understanding that I must have God's help to be the person that I want to be. . . I will intensify my efforts to lead our country and the world toward peace and freedom, prosperity and harmony, in the hope that with a **broken spirit** and a still-strong heart I can be used for greater good. . . **I ask that God give me a clean heart. . .**

Psalms 51

A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions. . .
For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, **have I sinned**....(vss. 1-4)

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me...(vs. 10)

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise (vs. 17)

