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## Preaching the David Story

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Anyone looking for an exciting story around which to compile a series of messages could do much worse than consider the story of David. In so many ways, it is a story that has it all. Here is someone who rises from relatively obscurity, who overcomes the jealous attention of the previous king, to become the one whose rule unites all Israel, north and south. He is the resourceful but trusting shepherd who is also a natural soldier, a leader recognised by all. At the same time he is astute enough to know how to deal with the political structures of his time. But unlike most romances, it does not end with David riding off into the sunset with all settled and arranged. Instead, after reading of his accession we have the long and twisted account of his fall through his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and the revolts led by Absalom and Sheba. Although it seems that David cannot survive Absalom's rebellion, it is Absalom who is defeated and David reclaims his throne, though it is never as secure as before. Indeed, David's final years are marked by weakness as his sons plot to succeed him. Moreover, various members of his court join different factions until Solomon is finally secured on the throne. There are twists and turns, a host of characters, and dangers thrown up at many points.

Seen in these terms, we might almost imagine that David is an ancient adventurer who invariably has some element of his personal resourcefulness on which to draw to overcome his adversaries. Whether consciously or not, such a reading of David has found its way into popular culture. Anyone who has seen *Raiders of the Lost Ark* should recognise the parallels between the scene where Jones faces a huge swordsman it seems he cannot overcome until he laconically pulls out his gun and David's defeat of Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. Indeed, this is but one example of how David's story has worked its way into popular culture to such an extent that many will not recognise, though preachers alert to such possibilities may well make good use of them. At the same time, as anyone who has done their exegetical homework on 1 Samuel 17 should know, David's defeat of Goliath is much more about knowing how and where God is working than simply how the small man overcomes the big one. 'A David and Goliath' story may mean that in the popular parlance, but ironically it is not the main point of the biblical story which highlights David's faith in

Yahweh's promise to Israel. The story's climax is not so much Goliath's defeat as the fact that his defeat vindicates David's claim in 1 Samuel 17:45–47 that his victory would prove Yahweh's power and demonstrate to the whole world that there was indeed a God in Israel.<sup>1</sup> David's story may well be an exciting one, but it is above all else theological literature and David is never the hero. Rather, although we know through the story how David becomes king, the focus throughout is on what Yahweh is doing. If we are true to the text in which we find David's story, then our preaching will find its goal in helping our congregations understand Yahweh and how he is at work throughout.

## Two False Paths

If this is therefore a story centred on Yahweh, then there are two false paths we need to highlight, since both lead us away from the goal of being true to the text itself. Both may seem to offer much, and both have found their way into many a sermon, but neither is true to the texts which tell David's story.

### *The Moral Exemplar*

The first of these is what we might call 'the moral exemplar.' This approach is one that is commonly employed when considering narrative texts in the Old Testament, especially as preachers grapple with the problem of narratives that do not appear to offer much else, or at least not much in the time that many have to do their exegesis and preparation. And it must be admitted that preaching any narrative text is not easy, not least because narratives do not come with their 'point' clearly stated for us. The Old Testament's narrative texts are not historicised variants of Aesop's fables. Neither are their central theological themes typically those outlined in our systematic theology classes, so thinking about these texts theologically can be a challenge. But if these things are 'written for our instruction' (Rom 15:4), then seeking some form of moral can seem the quickest way for preachers to move from the story to something they can apply to the lives of their congregations. After all, David is well known as the man who is 'after God's heart' (1 Sam 13:14), though in fact this is only a fairly oblique reference to him since we do not know that David is this person until 1 Samuel 16. But if David is someone 'after God's heart' then, the reasoning seems to be, there was something that marked him out as special, some sense in which he was clearly superior and thus worthy of emulation. But the difficulty with this approach is that it ignores the context in which this statement is made. In 1 Samuel 13 we have the first of a pair of stories about Saul's rejection, and the promise about this person is specific to their role as king. If the text refers to some quality of David, it is only in terms of his understanding of the role of king in Israel. But it is also highly probable that the

1. David G. Firth, "'That the World May Know': Narrative Poetics in 1 Samuel 16–17", in Michael Parsons (ed.), *Text and Task: Scripture and Mission* (Bletchley: Paternoster, 2005), pp. 20–32.

statement emphasises Yahweh's gracious choice rather than some quality in David, though, of course, these options are not mutually contradictory.<sup>2</sup>

The dangers of this approach ought to be apparent from some reflection on the text, especially as David is presented in Samuel – Kings. Although our first encounters with David paint him positively, there are hints even during the time of his rise that he can be morally ambiguous. We see this perhaps in the fact that although many people are said to 'love David' he is never expressly said to love anyone unless we read the ambiguous reference in 1 Samuel 16:18 this way, though it is more likely that it is Saul who loves David at this point.<sup>3</sup> But from 1 Samuel 18 on there are often points where he is morally ambiguous. Thus, when fleeing from Saul he not only allows Michal to lie on his behalf (though it might be argued he does not control this), it also becomes clear that he has a 'household idol' (1 Sam 19:13), employing the same term that Samuel had used when condemning Saul in 1 Samuel 15:23. Beyond this, we find David lying to Ahimelech to obtain provisions and Goliath's sword (1 Sam 21:1–10), something Saul later misconstrues when he orders the slaughter of the priests at Nob (1 Sam 22:6–20). We could multiply examples, but the point is that well before the account of his adultery with Bathsheba there are numerous signs that David is not presented as a faultless moral exemplar.

Despite this, we can still learn from him as we see him wrestling with the question of what it meant to be faithful to Yahweh in the face of significant challenges. But if we are true to the Bible's portrayal of David, we will not make him a faultless hero whose example should always be followed (save in the events of 2 Samuel 11 and its results) and recognise instead that it is his very frailty that makes him such an intriguing character.<sup>4</sup> We can learn from him, but we do so most effectively by focusing on what God is doing in and through David rather than making David our central focus.

### *Preaching the Gaps*

This path is equally common, but it too fails to proclaim the text itself, though again it does so from the best of motives. We might call this 'preaching the gaps.' The 'gaps' are those points where the text does not provide us with information

2. Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel: A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008), pp. 123–24 indeed argues that the phrase means that David is not someone whose life is according to God's heart in the sense it has traditionally been taken, though this rather overstates things. None of this means that we can never use characters in narrative as the basis for preaching, not least because in some narratives they are presented as exemplars. See Paul J. Kissling, 'Preaching Characters' in Grenville Kent, Paul J. Kissling and Laurence A. Turner (eds.), *He Began with Moses. . .: Preaching the Old Testament Today* (Nottingham: IVP, 2010), pp. 30–46.

3. G. C. Wong, 'Who Loved Whom? A Note on 1 Samuel xvi 21', *VT* 47 (1997), pp. 554–56 argues that it is David who loves Saul, but most commentators argue that it is Saul who loves David.

4. The book of Kings does use David as an exemplar (though cf. 1 Kings 15:4), but it is notable that in every case this is immediately defined in terms of the king leading the nation to worship Yahweh correctly. David is a model king in this respect, but it is quite a particular point.

about the motives and intentions of the characters involved in their various actions and choices, but which modern readers might fill in a number of ways. The most obvious sign of this approach comes when the preacher says ‘now I believe David thought. . .’, or something similar, thus offering an explanation for the gap in the text. The problem with this is that the proposal for filling the gap almost invariably interprets David in the preacher’s own social and cultural framework, resulting in a David who fits our cultural norms. But the differences in time, culture and place between David and now need to be respected if we are not to tame the text. Now, one of the skills of great storytelling is that it does leave gaps, points where readers can imaginatively enter the narrative, and David’s story is full of such things. For example, while fleeing from Saul, David moved from Adullam to Moab where he left his parents with the king of Moab (1 Sam 22:3). One can imagine several reasons why David did this, especially given the links between David’s family and Moab made clear in Ruth, but the text itself offers no comment. Perhaps more surprising is the fact that in 2 Samuel 11 we are given no direct reason as to why David committed adultery with Bathsheba and subsequently murdered Uriah. We can draw a range of conclusions at various points, but as intriguing as we might find these gap filling exercises, we can be reasonably sure that a text’s central themes lie in what it makes explicit, not in the gaps. To stay for the moment with 2 Samuel 11, we must finally recognise the crucial importance of the narrator’s observation that ‘the thing that David had done was evil in Yahweh’s eyes’ (2 Sam 11:27).

Of course, gap filling also occurs in the alternative version of David’s story in 1 Chronicles. There are significant similarities between these narratives, something we would expect if the author of Chronicles has consciously taken Samuel–Kings as a base text,<sup>5</sup> but Chronicles has different points of development and emphasis. To take one example, both 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21:1–22:1 recount the sin of David’s census and the subsequent punishment for it. The majority of contemporary readers are most exercised by the fact that in 2 Samuel 24:1 it is Yahweh who is said to have incited David to take the census where 1 Chronicles 21:1 has Satan.<sup>6</sup> But the more significant difference may well be that in Chronicles it is this that leads to the location of the temple whereas in Samuel the important associations are with the story of Saul’s famine in 2 Samuel 21:1–14 as a result of the extended chiasm running through 2 Samuel 21–24.<sup>7</sup> In Samuel, the emphasis falls

5. The same is true if we follow the proposal of A. Graeme Auld, *Kings without Privilege: David and Moses in the Story of the Bible’s Kings* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), that Samuel–Kings and Chronicles draw from a common source rather than Chronicles drawing from Samuel–Kings, though how we understand their relationship would then be different.

6. Or ‘an adversary’ as the term occurs most commonly in the Old Testament as a common noun meaning ‘adversary’ rather than the proper noun ‘Satan.’ See J. W. Wright, ‘The Innocence of David in 1 Chronicles 21’, *JSTOT* 60 (1993), pp. 87–105. If ‘an adversary’ is the correct translation then we may simply have an oblique reference to Yahweh in Chronicles, something obscured by the trend of most translations to see the proper noun ‘Satan’ here.

7. This reflects a complex literary feature of the books of Samuel that is beyond the scope of this paper. The links between these passages are helpfully treated in Herbert H. Klement, *II Samuel 21–24. Context, Structure and Meaning in the Samuel Conclusion* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter



upon the contrast between David and Saul and their respective responses to the effects of their sin. Chronicles has little interest in Saul, and does not make this contrast. Hence, the Chronicler's account tells how David's sin and its punishment ultimately led from David's own worship to the worship of the nation. Without underplaying the seriousness of David's sin here, anyone preaching the Chronicles' account will need to show how sin is not final, that worship is restorative, and that this restoration need not be restricted to the individual. That is, Chronicles has a constructive theology here, pointing to the potential of worship. By contrast, the emphasis in Samuel is on the damaging effects of sin as something not restricted to the individual, but emphasising the need to take sin seriously. Saul has not done this in 2 Samuel 21:1–14, so that David has to put things right<sup>8</sup> whilst in 2 Samuel 24 David has to recognise both the effects of his sin and the need to restore his relationship with both God and his people. Preachers dealing with the account in 2 Samuel need to show the seriousness of David's sin while showing that repentance involves restitution under the grace of God.

Although there are considerable points of overlap between these two accounts preachers should not use one to fill in what is missing in the other. Our goal is not to construct the full story of David's sin. Indeed, we cannot know the 'full story.' We can only know what these accounts tell us, and both have left significant gaps. But our goal is to preach the biblical text, and if we fuse Samuel and Chronicles we don't allow our congregations to hear either text in its own clarity. By fusing the two we create a hybrid and what we preach, though starting from the Bible, is not the Bible's own message. Preachers who wish to be faithful to the text need to allow each to be heard in its own terms. This does not mean that we must ignore the alternative accounts, as it is sometimes by reading one version in light of the other that we most clearly see how one develops its own themes. But we must let each text's voice guide ours in preaching and realise that its gaps are there because they are important to its narration. It is this, not a hybrid we create, that our congregations need to encounter.

### *Working with David's Story*

From what has been said, it should be clear that we need to focus on the text's central concerns and explore their significance for our congregations. It should be said that although these false paths need to be avoided, there is no one correct way that we have to preach this story. Each preacher has different gifts and the mode of our preaching ought to reflect that. Hence, as much as I might appreciate and prefer expository preaching, we should admit that not everyone has the skills in exegesis necessary to do this effectively if we mean by 'expository' a systematic

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Lang, 2000), pp. 161–84. See also Jin-Soo Kim, *Bloodguilt, Atonement, and Mercy: An Exegetical and Theological Study of 2 Samuel 21:1–14* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 205–23 and Laszlo T. Simon, *Identity and Identification: An Exegetical and Theological Study of 2 Sam 21–24* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 2000), pp. 53–159.

8. Though in fact David does not emerge without blemish in this narrative either, and is himself challenged by Rizpah's faithfulness.

reading that works through David's story. Although all preachers need an exegetical grounding for their preaching, some will be better suited to a more topical approach. Since my own inclinations as a preacher are expository, I would like to sketch what an expository series of sermons on David's story might look like. However, in doing so I shall try to point to some of the key themes that those more inclined to a topical approach might consider. For the sake of simplicity, we will consider here only the representation of David in Samuel – Kings.

The best option for an expository series is one where the preacher works more or less systematically through the whole of 1 Samuel 16–1 Kings 2, though an 'edited highlights' package might work for some. Many congregations could struggle to have a sustained treatment of such a lengthy text, and it might be appropriate to consider presenting David's story within four separate 'chunks.' These would more or less follow the source analysis many scholars offer for David's story, though many regard them simply as appropriate division points within the narrative rather than as discrete sources. In addition, the exact boundaries of these sections are open to some dispute, but the divisions offered here offer a coherent structure for a sermon series even if other divisions might also work.

Thus, an initial series could consider the story of David's rise to the throne of Judah. This would cover 1 Samuel 16:1–2 Samuel 2:4. This involves covering some of the best known stories about David, such as his anointing, the defeat of Goliath and the time he refused to kill Saul in the cave, though it would also involve some lesser known accounts such as his time at Keilah or the period he spent living among the Philistines. There is great value in a congregation knowing some of the stories, but there can also be a sense of excitement as they encounter less familiar parts of the narrative.

Preachers working through this material will discover that one of the most important literary features of the books of Samuel is the ways in which it employs repetition.<sup>9</sup> Thus, we have two accounts of David arriving in Saul's court in 1 Samuel 16–17, two accounts of David not killing Saul in 1 Samuel 24 and 26, and two accounts of Saul's death in 1 Samuel 31 and 2 Samuel 1. These repetitions are not simply a careless collection of sources, but rather a device to emphasise key points within the overall story. Even stories which do not have any obvious parallels, such as Saul's visit to the spirit-wife at Endor in 1 Samuel 28, actually include many intentional echoes of earlier narratives with Samuel. This does not mean we can skip these parallel accounts as a neat way of abridging a lengthy block of text, but need rather to see the different contribution each makes to understanding a central theme. To take the example of the two occasions where David doesn't kill Saul, it is apparent that there are not only many parallels between the two chapters, there are also key points of development. Thus, in 1 Samuel 24 David is struck by his conscience for cutting off the corner of Saul's robe and has to oppose his men's claim

9. See David G. Firth, 'Play it Again Sam: The Poetics of Narrative repetition in 1 Samuel 1–7', *Tyndale Bulletin* 56/2 (2005), pp. 1–18, and Grenville J.R. Kent, *Say It Again, Sam: A Literary and Filmic Study of Narrative Repetition in 1 Samuel 28* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011).

that this is a (literally) God-given chance to kill Saul. But he doesn't know anything yet about how Yahweh deals with his adversaries, and David only responds to Saul. By contrast, the events in 1 Samuel 26 show David taking the initiative to show he is no threat to Saul because of what he has discovered through Abigail's intervention when he went to kill Nabal in 1 Samuel 25. Repetition drives home the key point that power is not something to be grasped through violence, but the carefully delineated differences also show that David is growing in his understanding of this and therefore what it means to trust Yahweh when under pressure.

A second block could consider David as king in 2 Samuel 2:5–8:17. Again, preachers will note repetitions, so that David's conflict with Ish-bosheth in 2 Samuel 2:5–4:12 represents a short rivalry narrative that parallels the earlier long rivalry narrative between David and Saul. Where the first block has a largely continuing narrative line, there is a marked change in 5:1–8:17. Here, we have summary material drawn from across the whole of David's reign, with a chiasm in 5:17–8:14 which focuses on David in worship and the covenant with David in 7:1–17. By drawing material from across the whole of David's reign readers are given an overall assessment of David's reign that is positive.<sup>10</sup> David is still not presented as a flawless character, and preachers will need to ensure that the tensions evident in 2 Samuel 6 where David brings the ark to the city of David are properly brought out. David failed to bring the ark on the first attempt and was in conflict with Michal when he did. Even at his best, David remains a flawed character, and yet Yahweh not only continued to work through him, he established a covenant with him that was in many ways the seedbed for the messianic hope in the Old Testament.

A third block would then consider 2 Samuel 9–20. Unlike much of the rest of Samuel which has sequences of shorter, independent (but related) narratives, this is one of the longest continuous narratives of the Old Testament.<sup>11</sup> Here we encounter David at his lowest, although his move to bring Mephibosheth to his court (2 Samuel 9) seems positive. But subsequently we have his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah (2 Samuel 11) before David's encounter with Nathan in 2 Samuel 12:1–15a. Preachers here will need to be attuned to the skill with which the story is told, so that Nathan's declaration of Yahweh's punishment on David in 2 Samuel 12:7–14 virtually becomes the text for what follows. Careful readers will note that Yahweh is mentioned rather less in these chapters than other parts of Samuel, but the reason for this is that we are told what Yahweh is doing at key points and there is no need to revisit this. It is important that the importance of this announcement is recognised so we appreciate that although we see David's failures with his family and then the rest of the kingdom in 2 Samuel 13–20, we also are shown Yahweh's punishment on him being fully worked out.<sup>12</sup> This is also why it

10. See David G. Firth, 'Shining the Lamp: The Rhetoric of 2 Samuel 5–24', *Tyndale Bulletin* 52/2 (2001), pp. 203–24.

11. Only the Joseph story (Genesis 37–50) and the book of Esther are of similar length and complexity.

12. On this element, see especially Gillian Keys, *The Wages of Sin: A Reappraisal of the 'Succession Narrative'* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 127–41.

is important that we have a positive assessment of David for the whole of his reign in the preceding block. In this block David fails, fails spectacularly, but this does not mean the end of his reign. His punishment is painful; not only for David but also the whole kingdom. Nevertheless, failure is not the end because this is also a story of Yahweh ensuring his purposes are being fulfilled. What ultimately marks David out as Yahweh's ruler is that he accepts this greater authority of Yahweh, and for all his failures in this section of Samuel, he can still be assessed positively.

A fourth block would then consider 2 Samuel 21–24 and 1 Kings 1:1–2:11. There is a clear difference between these two sections, but both cause us to reflect on the whole of David's reign. 2 Samuel 21–24 has long been regarded as a sort of appendix, a gathering of miscellaneous traditions about David that did not quite fit elsewhere. But recent studies have shown that this is in fact a carefully structured collection of texts which are an intentional conclusion to Samuel.<sup>13</sup> It has long been recognised that these chapters are presented in an extended chiasm, but the links between this section and 2 Samuel 5:17–8:14 have only been explored more recently. It now seems clear that where 5:17–8:14 present the public David, these chapters let us see the private figure. Moreover, 2 Samuel 9–20 has demonstrated a gap between the public David and the private figure, so these chapters show him bringing those elements together. Further, just as 2 Samuel 9–20 is ultimately a narrative about the punishment of sin and ultimate restoration, so the first and last narratives in this sequence also pick up this theme, highlighting the impossibility of cheap grace. At the heart of these chapters are the two poems, 2 Samuel 22 and 23:1–7. 2 Samuel 22 is virtually identical to Psalm 18, but it is important that it is interpreted within its context in Samuel as a key reflection on the nature of kingship, and in this it is paired with David's 'Last Words' in 2 Samuel 23:1–7. These poems resonate with themes from Hannah's Song (1 Samuel 2:1–10) and David's lament over Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:17–27), and so become a means for reflecting not only on David, but also for assessing future kings and the means by which David becomes the model for all subsequent kings in Israel and Judah. Sin, punishment, restoration and righteousness are the key themes of these chapters and they provide much for reflection. Beyond this, 1 Kings 1:1–2:11 picks up David's story at the end of his life. As with 2 Samuel 9–20, it is not a pretty picture, as it shows him as old, weak, and at times vindictive. This is not David as a 'model', but rather someone who is manipulated by all to ensure that Solomon follows him on the throne. Sin may not have prevented David from being mightily used by Yahweh, but it does not mean he did not still suffer the consequences of that sin.

## Conclusion

David's story is a powerful one and it resonates with modern concerns about power and its abuse, sin and forgiveness, restoration and righteousness. As preachers, we are called to let our congregations discover the wonder of this story, and

13. On this, see especially Klement, *II Samuel 21–24*.

through the story to appreciate the ways in which God is at work. Since God's promise to David is also central to the messianic hope, it is from this that we can further explore the ways God continues to work in and among us through Jesus, 'great David's greater son.'<sup>14</sup> Although we have not explored it in this paper, we do ultimately need to bring our congregations to Jesus as we reflect on this story, but the key first step is to hear this story with its own emphases and interests, because only when we understand this story as God's word to us will we appreciate what it means to hear it as those who know God through Jesus.

But what would this look like in practice? Since I don't think I have ever heard it preached, I would like to take 1 Samuel 19 as a sample, giving some comments on how it might be preached.

The chapter is paired with 1 Samuel 18 where Saul primarily attempted to kill David through others (notably the Philistines), whereas now his intentions are publicly expressed (1 Sam 19:1). Anyone who has first preached 1 Samuel 18 will want to note both the repetitions and the contrasts here. Thus, both chapters have Saul attempting to kill David under the influence of the baleful spirit (1 Sam 18:10–11, 1 Sam 19:10–11), though a consistent theme in Samuel is that Saul always misses with his spear. Yet, although he 'prophesies'<sup>15</sup> in 18:10, he does not in 19:10, with that deferred until 19:23–24. Throughout the chapter Saul attempts more desperate strategies to kill David, but is initially prevented by his own children and ultimately, when David had fled to Samuel, by the Spirit who leads him to prophesy by rolling on the ground naked for a day and a night (1 Sam 19:23–24). The more Saul sets himself against David, the more his own sin costs him because as becomes explicit by the end of the chapter, he has set himself against God and it is God who prevents him taking David's life. This is important because God has already announced Saul's replacement with David, a point on which he will not recant (1 Sam 15:29). So, the more Saul sets himself against David, the more he sets himself against the purposes of God. And in spite of Saul's power relative to David, God is ensuring his promise concerning David is being fulfilled.

That God is at work to fulfil his promise through David thus points us to the theological motif to develop in our preaching. Whether it is family, the baleful spirit or the direct intervention of God's Spirit, these are all ways in which God is at work. Indeed, in 1 Samuel 19:18–24 it seems as if David has no escape, and yet God intervenes. The preacher could reasonably be content to develop this theme as each of the situations presented in the chapter is rich with analogies for both the individual believer and the church today. And it is important to realise that God's purposes are not frustrated, even when faced by seemingly overwhelming odds, but also that the means by which this happens will vary considerably. We could develop this further by reflecting on what those purposes are today within

14. For a useful treatment on how to preach Christ from the Old Testament, see R. W. L. Moberly, 'Preaching Christ from the Old Testament', in Kent, et al., *He Began with Moses...*, 233–50.

15. Many EVV (e.g., ESV) have raved in 18:10, but this misses the parallel to 19:18–24.

the mission of God. The preacher might then show how these events are preparatory for God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 and then show how this develops through to the New Testament. This provides us with a firmer anchor for understanding the points where God's purposes are equally certain today, though anyone preaching through the whole of this chunk of Samuel will probably want to avoid making that connection every week. And in the end, whether it is by open words of truth, the failings of sin, human craft or the direct intervention of the Spirit, that God is at work to ensure the fulfilment of his promises is surely good news our congregations need to hear.