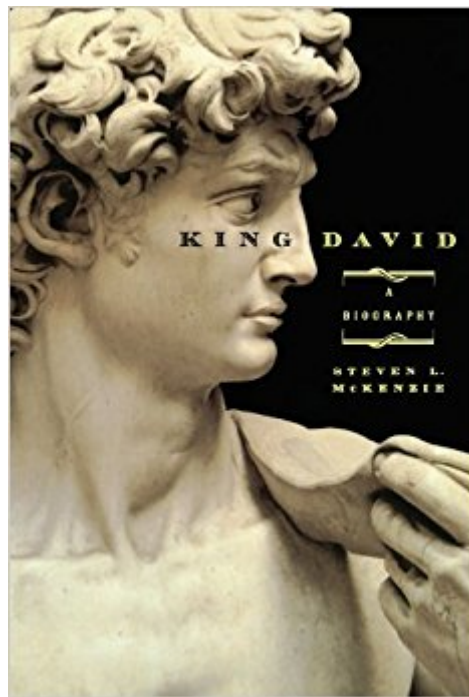


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King David: A Biography



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

Arguably, the three great stories of the Bible are the stories of Moses, King David, and Jesus. While some of the stories in Genesis may be easier for the average person to recount (loosely) from memory, the story of King David gets more ink from the biblical authors. With the publication of KING DAVID: A BIOGRAPHY by Steven McKenzie and THE DAVID STORY by Robert Alter, it looks like Israel's great king might finally be getting his due recognition (vis-a-vis Moses and Jesus,

anyway). "Part of the appeal of the David story," says McKenzie, "has been the earthiness of its plot. It reads like a modern soap opera with plenty of sex, violence, and struggles for power. The relationships are intricate." David's story (found primarily in 1 & 2 Samuel) reads like a season of "Dallas" and has inspired modern classics by the likes of William Faulkner and Joseph Heller. Anyone who works in an office, a government agency, or university is more likely to identify with David--or one of the secondary characters in his narrative--than they would with Jesus. David is as guileful as Jesus was guileless. In spite of his modest claim to be offering nothing new, McKenzie has accomplished an amazing feat. He has organized, presented, evaluated, and summarized recent biblical scholarship on the David story. He also discusses the scant, but intriguing, archaeological evidence of David's reign. He is not dismissive of the biblical record, but he deftly helps the average reader to understand the kind of reasonable skepticism that scholars have had to adopt in order to extract a plausible portrait of David from all the spin-doctoring the biblical authors and editors have put on the events they describe. The economy and clarity of McKenzie's prose and the relentless rationality of his argumentation is gripping and persuasive. He explains why scholars find certain texts "apologetic" and others more likely to reflect events as they might actually have occurred. McKenzie takes each major phase of David's career and methodically creates a portrait of the man. Each chapter ends with a short summary, so the reader has a second chance to decide for him or herself if the emerging portrait is credible. I found McKenzie's discussion of David's confrontation with Goliath and his brief, revisionist portrait of Bathsheba especially fascinating. The extensive bibliography directs the ambitious reader to works of primary scholarship (mostly in English) and to other literary treatments of the David story. To get the most out of this book, take McKenzie's suggestion and read or re-read the biblical texts first.

Steven McKenzie's biography of David is based on the theory that the account in Samuel is an "apologia"--a brief for the defense, and that if you look hard at what the text seems to be defending David against, you can figure out what David actually did. This is a smart assumption but the suspicious reading it generates results in a biography of David that would make Ken Starr's portrait of Bill Clinton look like a panegyric. The only virtue McKenzie can allow David is that of being an effective guerrilla warrior because, if he hadn't been, he couldn't have reached the throne in the first place. The rest of the story is viewed as pro-David propaganda. If the story tells us that David spared the life of the worthless Nabal and that Nabal subsequently died of natural causes, it means that this is the cover story and that David must have killed him or had him killed. The problem for the reader comes when you ask if there is any way David could have had any attractive qualities. Given

the way McKenzie reads Samuel, the nice things that are said about David must be spin, and the nasty facts reported about David (and there are plenty of them, including his adultery with Bathsheba, his inability to control his sensual and ambitious children, his vindictiveness against political enemies) are facts too well known to be denied. Given McKenzie's method, David simply cannot have done anything right. The fact is that, like almost every figure in the Bible, David's life exists in the text and only there. There aren't any alternative witnesses to who he was and what he did. The story in the book of Samuel contains all we are ever likely to know about David, and any method that insists on reading past the story to the REAL David is going to come up either with a panegyric or a lampoon, depending on how suspicious a method of reading it adopts. But the book of Samuel itself is far more complex than any of these simplifying readings. It presents a warrior and a king who was decidedly human--sometimes all too human--and depicts his world with a richness of texture that lawyer's briefs, like McKenzie's, are necessarily going to flatten out. McKenzie's book will be useful if it makes readers turn back to Samuel and read it closely and attentively, but the story it tells is a prosecutorial brief that, seen against its source, seems thin and unconvincing.

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