

The Stones Cry Out: House of David

King David is, along with Moses, the dominant figure in the Hebrew Bible. He is mentioned more than 1,000 times. If Moses represents the age of the Exodus—the age of captivity and liberation—David represents the royal period in which Israel truly became a nation. The Davidic dynasty—the “House of David”—lasted 400 years.

David’s rise to the throne is itself the stuff of legend. Think of the epic confrontation of David and the Philistine giant Goliath, whom David felled with his slingshot. David succeeded Saul, and he was the one who captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites. Later, David is said to be the primary author of the Psalms. David, not Saul, was God’s exemplary leader.

Why David? While Saul was an occasionally intemperate ruler, David’s sins seem far greater. David set his eyes on a young woman named Bathsheba, made her pregnant, and then sent her husband Uriah, who was a soldier, to the front, so that he would be killed, and David would have unchallenged access to the man’s wife.

The prophet Nathan approached David and posed to him a parable involving a rich man and a poor man. The rich man, he said, had many lambs; the poor man, just one. The rich man wanted to have a banquet, but rather than use one of his own lambs, he seized the solitary lamb of the poor man and used that one instead.

This is the sixth in a series of 12 articles adapted from my new book *The Stones Cry out: Biblical Archaeology, Prophecy and the Last Days*. It’s out October 13 from Charisma Books, but you can pre-order now from Amazon by clicking on the link below.



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What, the prophet asked David, should happen to such a man? The Bible says that David burned with anger, and he said, "The man who did this must die." Then the prophet Nathan pointed his finger at David and said, "You are that man!" (2 Samuel 12: 1-7)

It is David's reaction, at this crucial moment, that captures the essence of the man. David could easily have rationalized his actions, in the manner that Saul was accustomed to doing, but he did not. He wept. He confessed his guilt. He accepted responsibility. He promised to atone for his deeds and to become a good and just king. For these reasons, the Bible tells us David became a man after God's own heart.

For centuries—indeed for nearly 3,000 years—if you believed in King David, it would have to be on faith. King David lived only in the Bible and later Bible-related commentaries; there was no early, non-biblical attestation of him.

Consequently a group of scholars known as the Copenhagen school, influenced by the skeptical "higher criticism" of the nineteenth century, claimed that King David was a mythical figure, similar to King Arthur. Sure, his exploits were legendary, but that's because they never happened. The entire biblical story is a legend.

Other scholars, like Israel Finkelstein of Tel Aviv University, said that even if David existed, he was hardly a great king but more akin to a local tribal chieftain. Jerusalem itself was a village or at best a "cow town" in the eleventh and tenth centuries B.C. The story of David was more likely exaggerated or embellished, hardly a surprise since, according to Finkelstein, the biblical narrative was composed many centuries later, as a retroactive project of giving the Jews a glorious history and justifying their theological and

political claims.

In 1993, a large stone slab was discovered in a rebuilt ninth century gateway in a place called Tel Dan on the northern border of Israel. Written in Aramaic, this stone monument or “stele” was dated to 841 B.C. It was a victory stele, attributed to King Hazael of Aram, which is in modern-day Syria.

While the legible portion of the slab mentioned the names of various kings of Israel and Judah, the man who discovered the stele, the renowned archeologist Avraham Biran, was transfixed by a single phrase on the inscription. The phrase itself merely said “Bwt-Dwd,” but Biran knew what it meant. It meant “house of David.” King Hazael of Aram was proclaiming a great victory over a Judean king who represented the house of David.

The Bible speaks repeatedly not only of King David but also of the house of David. This is a reference to David’s lineage, to the dynasty of kings who trace their descent back to David. And here, for the first time, archeologists have confirmation not only of David himself but also of a line of kings descended from him.

The confirmation came not from the Jews themselves—this could be attributed to some sort of manufactured propaganda—but from a hostile source, a king who sought to subdue and conquer the house of David. Hazael had no reason to lie, and moreover, his pride in vanquishing the house of David also suggested that the house of David was a sufficiently established and powerful force for Hazael to think it worth boasting about.

A stunning validation of David and his dynasty a mere 150 years after his death—no more decisive attestation could be found! No wonder that the skeptics and biblical minimalists freaked out. One man, Niels Peter Lemche, even proclaimed the stele itself a forgery, even though it had been encrusted in a thick layer of ash and there is simply no way Biran could—or,

given his impeccable reputation, would—have faked it.

Additionally, the stele was further confirmed to be authentic when two more pieces were discovered at the site the following year.

Today no serious scholar doubts the existence of David or a house of David. This evidence comes not only from the Tel Dan stele, but also from the Mesha stele, also called the Moabite Stone. Dated around the same time as the Tel Dan stele, the Mesha stele refers to the relations between the Moabite king Mesha and the Israelites, and in the course of that it mentions, once again, the “house of David.”

Case closed. At this point, many of the minimalists simply retreated, sulking, from the scene. But Israel Finkelstein persisted in his attempts to minimize the scope of David’s rule and dynasty. Sure, he said, David existed, but was he really a king with the stature and authority ascribed to him in the Bible? If he was a king, where was his palace?

Enter archeologist Eilat Mazar. In the early 2000s, Mazar approached the folks at the City of David foundation, who were doing archeological work in Jerusalem, and said, “You need to move your visitor center.” When they asked why, she replied, “Because right under this place where we are standing right now is King David’s palace.”

When she was asked how she could possibly know the location of David’s palace, Mazar revealed that the Bible itself gives clues to its location. It says that when the Philistines came close to the city, David went down from his palace to seek refuge in the citadel (2 Samuel 5: 17).

Scholars already believed they knew the location of Jerusalem’s Citadel. From that reference point, Eilat Mazar believed the palace should be slightly further up the hill, right where the modern tourist center was situated.

Mazar's further evidence was the discovery in that very area of a Phoenician capital. A capital is the decorated top part of a pillar. These capitals had already been discovered at ancient royal centers in Israel and Judah. The Jerusalem capital in question wasn't found by Mazar; it had been discovered in 1963 by the British archeologist Kathleen Kenyon. The capital had been sitting in the Israel Museum.

Mazar opened up her Bible to 2 Samuel 5:11. "Now Hiram king of Tyre sent envoys to David, along with cedar logs and carpenters and stonemasons, and they built a palace for David." Tyre was one of the most important cities in Phoenicia. Evidently King David had asked the Phoenicians, who were experts at construction, to build his palace for him, and king Hiram had agreed. Mazar believed that the reason a Phoenician capital was found on the hilltop at the City of David is that this is where the Phoenicians built King David's palace.

By 2005, Mazar's team had the funding and permissions to begin their excavation. Soon they discovered huge early Iron Age walls that were 15-20 feet thick—part of a monumental building. Look for yourself. Is it even reasonable to suppose that this is some ordinary residence, or something other than a royal construction?

No structure like this existed in Israel at the time. Mazar also found various artifacts such as pottery and organic material that she dated to around 1,000 B.C., when David ruled. Mazar confidently declared, I have found David's palace!

The critics, Finkelstein and many others, challenged her. They said this might be some other royal administrative building, not necessarily David's palace. They said some of the walls dated to the ninth, not the tenth century, so even if it were David's palace, it might not have been completed until after David's reign. Later, some scholars said it was built slightly

before David was king.

But these were quibbles. No one could deny that Mazar had located a palatial governmental structure built in the narrow window of time that included David's reign. Mazar's discovery must surely rank as one of the great archeological finds of the twenty-first century. Together with the Tel Dan inscription, it establishes not only the existence and dynastic succession of David but also that his reign matches the one given in the Bible.

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