

Chapter 2  
The Pioneering Persons  
David, the King

The second pioneering person of Scripture was David the king. He was remembered as a just and God-fearing king. Before David became king in Jerusalem, however, he was a Hebrew chieftain.

David was from the tribe of Judah and the town of Bethlehem. Much of his early life has been shrouded in legend. He was the youngest of eight sons of Jesse and without question was a person of great charm and ability. The stories concerning his early life, however, sound like similar ones that grew up around the careers of a young George Washington or Abraham Lincoln. According to one story, David was brought to the royal court as a musician to cheer King Saul when he was depressed. According to another, he first won the king's attention when in hand-to-hand combat he defeated the Philistine champion Goliath. It may be, even, that his name was originally not David but El-hanon. The name David has always intrigued scholars: No Israelite before this man had carried it, and as far as we know, none afterward. It may be that at first it was not a proper name at all but was instead a title which meant "leader, chief." It may actually have originated in the recently rediscovered ancient Kingdom of Elba; the word *Davidum* and its cognates have turned up frequently in the Elbian literature that has been translated so far. At any rate, we know the man as David and, when he does emerge from the dim light of legend into the clear light of history, he is first seen as a Hebrew chieftain.

"Hebrew" is a word often used interchangeably with "Israelite" and "Jew" but there are important differences between them. "Israel" is the most sweeping name for this people whose life we are studying. The name, however, went through a number of transformations. First it referred to the twelve tribes under Moses and Joshua; then it was used by David and Solomon as the name for their kingdom; following that, it was the designation for the northern kingdom composed of ten of the twelve tribes; finally it lost all specific reference and was employed as a general term for the people as a whole or for some portion of them. But if Israel was a term with a political connotation, "Hebrew" had basically a sociological reference. The word turned up not only in Israel's but in every part of the ancient world and had a history that dated back centuries before the time of David. In one place it was spelled "habiru," in another "khipiru," in another "apiru," and there were undoubtedly other spellings as well. The people given this name were the outcasts of society: those in debt, those who were slaves or former slaves, those who were disappointed with the ruling government of a city or tribe and who were at odds with the establishment. The picture to have in mind, I think, is that of Robin Hood and his merry men, basically decent people who were on the outs with whatever group was ruling the

country and who banded together for protection and support. The third name, “Jew,” had primarily a religious meaning. It was a contraction of the name of the people of Judah and was used to describe those Judahites who, in the exile in Babylon, recast their faith and retained their religious identity. It became the name that the returnees from exile brought with them when they came back to their homeland and, for the 2500 years since, it has been the familiar name for those who practice the religion of Judaism.

To return to David: In the early career as chief of a band of Hebrews, he stayed largely in the mountainous strongholds of Judah. Men joined his group until he had an army of from 400 to 600 warriors, a large army for that time. David intended to use his army to pursue a goal that was forming in his mind—to be king in Israel. As a way of keeping his options open before his purpose became clear to others, David entered into a treaty with the king of Gath. It was a cunning move on David’s part. Gath was one of the only two Philistine cities located in the Canaanite foothills away from the coastal area where the main Philistine power lay, so Gath was able to follow a course of action somewhat independent of the other cities in the Philistine alliance. David, consequently, was able to be allied with the Philistines and yet not quite so; able to be allied with Saul and yet not quite so. As a vassal of Gath, he could sometimes fight for King Saul and sometimes against him, as it suited his own policies. This independent course was especially noteworthy in the battle of Gilboa, the key battle in the extended war between Israel and Philistia, in which Saul and his sons were killed. David and his men were not involved in this battle, partly because David did not want to commit his forces to the lost cause of Saul’s kingship. From David’s point of view, his decision to remain aloof from this battle was certain to forward his personal cause: the Philistines could not blame him for his absence since they had specifically asked him not to enter the battle, and the defeated Israelites could turn to him as the one leader who might salvage their battered cause. Hence David was the one significant leader on both sides to survive the ghastly wars of Israelites and Philistines with both his military forces and his political aims intact.

This leads to the first contribution David made: He was a talented kingdom-builder.

Using the independent power base he had built in the mountains while Israel and Philistia were locked in combat, David then turned his attention to his own land of Judah. Even during his outlaw period, when he and his men were foraging for food for themselves and their families, David had already ingratiated himself with the Judeans by protecting their landholders from robbers and dividing with the elders of Judah the spoil taken from the raids on their enemies. Moving quickly after the death of Saul to consolidate his gains, David had himself anointed king of Judah at Hebron. He exercised this office for seven years. Not content to be king of Judah only, he kept a constant eye on affairs in the northern tribes as well. These tribes were still giving their primary allegiance to a son of Saul, Ishbosheth, who was the tool of his general Abner. But Abner had a falling out with Ishbosheth and agreed to deliver the remnant of Saul’s kingdom to David; how much of this nefarious activity was actually engineered by David, Scripture leaves us to decide for ourselves. Part of the agreement seems to have been that all of Saul’s male descendants were to be nullified as rival claimants to Israel’s throne, and Abner carried out the assignment with relish. While David stayed aloof from the operation, or even

seemed to be treating these men with courtesy and style, accidents of one sort or another did seem to occur to them, and before long not one of them was in a position to claim Saul's kingship for himself. With David seemingly the only possible inheritor of the throne, the elders of the northern tribes approached him at Hebron and asked that he become ruler over them. Since David had had this in his mind from the beginning, and had applied all his cunning to its fulfillment, this was a request he was not reluctant to fulfill.

But his task of kingdom building was not done; having added the northern tribes to his growing power, he now had to deal with the Philistines. This sea-people from the Aegean area had worked themselves down the coast of the Mediterranean until they had taken control of most of the ancient land of the Canaanites. In a series of rapid and strategic moves, David broke Philistine control of Canaan once and for all and shut his enemy up in a small area of the coastal plain. Then, having secured his western border against hostile attack, he moved east: with amazing swiftness he took over the small kingdoms of Moab, Ammon and Edomite; he even moved north to extend his suzerainty over the areas we know as Syria. David was a military man of outstanding ability, and the kingdom he wedged out for himself in this Mideastern territory was the largest kingdom the people of Israel were ever to occupy.

He then took another important step. He occupied the city of Jerusalem, the property of the Jebusites. It was a nearly impregnable mountain fortress which neither Judah nor Israel nor Philistia had been able to capture; in fact, they may not have considered it worthy of capture. But David did. He drove the king of the Jebusites from his ancient citadel and made it "the City of David," the political and religious center of his expanding kingdom.

Lying along the spine of a mountain, Jerusalem's measured only 1300 by 325 feet. By our standards, ancient cities like Jerusalem were tiny; but their functions were extensive indeed. They were used as the residence of kings and administrative officials, for storage of harvests as well as of official records, for places of refuge in time of war. David had many reasons for coveting this particular city. For one thing, located in a remote part of the Judean highland, it had already been in existence as a city for at least a thousand years and it offered all kinds of obstacles to the ambition of any rival who may have wanted to challenge David's right to rule. David also wanted Jerusalem because it provided a neutral site for his capital; belonging to neither north nor south in Israel, it had no associations with any individual tribe and so offered an unencumbered location for the center of David's completely new dream of empire.

But David also needed Jerusalem for reasons of statecraft. His many conquests had presented him with a major problem: How could a shepherd boy turned guerrilla warrior with no training in the arts of governance manage the complex affairs of a far-reaching empire? David found his answer in Jerusalem. The city provided him with a bureaucratic substructure already skilled in the administration of the extensive kingdom David was in the process of constructing. It had its complement of priests, scribes, and other officials, some of whose names we still know: Zadok the Jebusite priest, Nathan the court prophet, Benaiah the commander of the king's own bodyguard, Shemei, Rie, and others of obscure titles. These were men trained in the techniques of government, and like most bureaucrats they were more loyal to their jobs than to

their boss; so they quickly transferred their skills from the service of the Jebusites to the service of the Israelites. The decision to incorporate these men into his royal court had long-term consequences for David and for Israel: it gave David the skilled technicians he needed in order to fulfill his dream of empire, but it also put Israel into the hands of alien forces whose impact would eventually tear apart the very empire to whose building David had devoted his life.

For the present, however, as David stood on the hills of Jerusalem and contemplated what he had accomplished, he could be pleased with the tangible results of his efforts. He was now king of Jerusalem, king of the states of Judah and Israel, sovereign over numerous Canaanite and Philistine city-states, king of Ammon, ruler of the provinces around Damascus, sovereign of the vassal monarchies of Moab and Edom. His kingdom had grown far beyond the confines of a purely Israelite state. It had become a Canaanite-Syrian empire, embracing numerous different peoples and united only in the person of the king. David's political organization was the most extensive independent power structure to emerge to date on Canaanite-Syrian soil. In the few years of his rule, the life-situation of the Israelite tribes had changed completely. Previously, they had lived side by side with the other inhabitants of the country and were frequently subject to them. Now their king had built an imposing empire and was greatly esteemed and widely feared. Their external security was assured, and they themselves were part of the greatest empire in the world. David's kingdom was a noteworthy phenomenon in world history, and it was the personal achievement of one extremely intelligent and uncommonly successful man.

David's second major contribution, as seen in the eyes of the writers of Scripture, was in the area of justice. His reputation was that of a just King who established a kingdom where justice reigned.

Upon assuming the office of king, David had also inherited a long tradition of justice in Israel. The tradition, rooted in both Moses and the patriarchs, was called by the name of "Torah." To the Israelites "Torah" involved the two concepts that we know as "case law" and "legal precedent." The precedents, principles of law, were largely summed up in the Ten Commandments: thou shalt have no other gods, shall honor the sabbath, father and mother, shall not steal, kill, commit adultery, lie or covet. These principles of law had to be brought to bear upon the individual situations of life. Elders of the people would gather in the evening at the gate of the city. The gate, with its guard room and ramp built at right angles to the gate itself, provided the only free space for assembly in the compressed area with its walls. Anyone with a grievance against a neighbor would come to the elders to present his case. The elders would then, together, try to work through the particular case to arrive at a solution that was satisfactory to the law as they knew it, to the parties in the case, and to the community itself. This total process of applying precedent to case law became known as torah. When the king, in the person of David, was added to the picture, he became responsible for seeing that justice was done in the land of Israel. His role was administrative, not judicial: he was not supposed to formulate law but to administer the law they already had and to see that all the citizens of his kingdom received their just due under their laws. David was apparently able to do this to the

satisfaction of the people. He became known as a just king, and he saw to it that justice was applied to all people.

At least this was so in the early part of his reign. In his later reign the process began to break down. To begin with, David's machinery for justice was simply not comprehensive enough to meet the demands placed upon it. Torah had been designed to work in the local village and clan, and it had been effective there. Now, David was governing a kingdom far larger than had been envisioned by the designers of torah, and the ancient processes of torah were stretched far beyond their capacity to respond. Torah envisioned a single law code as its basis of justice; but in David's kingdom each clan and tribe had its own code of laws and tradition of justice, and there was no single code to which all the diverse populations subscribed. Torah envisioned the village elders as not only the first court of jurisdiction but as the final court of appeal; David was not able to erect a system of intermediate courts to which appeals could be made; and when he tried to fill this need by setting himself up as the court of last resort, he was predictably swamped by gathering case load thrust upon him from all parts of the empire. Justice began to fail in Israel because David could not work out the technical problems of developing the systems by which justice could be delivered to the diverse citizenry of the realm. Moreover, there were breakdowns of justice in David's own family. David could not control his own sons, and they got away with misdeeds which would have brought instant punishment to anyone else in the kingdom. There was even a moment when David could not control himself. With Bathsheba he broke the law against adultery, and only through a warning from his court prophet, Nathan, was he brought back to obeying the law that he himself was supposed to administer.

There was an even more fundamental reason that justice began to waver in Israel. David began to move away from the covenant by which Moses had bound the people to God. In Moses' delineation of the covenant God was free to do what seemed best in all human situations, but the human party, the people of Israel, were directly accountable to God for the way they organized their religious, political, economic, social and personal lives. David and his court changed this. In the covenant as it began to evolve in royal Jerusalem God was seen as making a promise to the monarch that required no corresponding obligations on the monarch's part. This covenant, stated in Second Samuel, chapter seven reads like this:

When you (David) lie down with your fathers, I will raise up one of your descendants, and I will establish his rule. When he does wrong, I will correct him by the rod of men, but my loyalty will not be turned away from him. Your house and kingship shall be firmly fixed before me. Your throne shall be established forever.

The changes being made were subtle, but they were profound. The parties to the covenant were still the same: God was one party, and the people were the other. It was the direction of the promises that was different. Instead of the people promising to organize their lives in ways that reflected their direct accountability to God, here God promised to protect the kingdom, and God's promise was so binding that not even wrongdoing on the part of the monarch would cause him to break his promise. The nation might suffer if the king was wicked, for God would

chastise it as a father punished an erring son, but the oath of God would continue to stand, and God was made to make good on God's promise to protect and cherish his people despite their perverse behavior. The significant change lay in the matter of accountability: God was irrevocably bound to protect the kingdom, but the kingdom was not irrevocably bound to be faithful to him. With this Davidic covenant, the Israelites took a giant step toward the basic heresy of the pagan nations: they united throne and altar. When the throne controls the altar, when the ruling power is supported by the apparatus of religion rather than being called by it to accountability to the living God, then the king had a free hand to do as he pleased with his kingdom. David moved in that direction and his descendants developed the idea more completely still. Calling the king to deliver justice to his people was much more difficult under the terms of the Davidic covenant than it was under the terms of the Mosaic one.

We are beginning to talk of religious matters in Israel, and as we do so we are blending into a third area in which David made a significant contribution to the faith of the people of Scripture. David, the builder of the kingdom of justice, was also remembered as a God-fearing king, who took positive steps to bring himself and the people to the worship of Yahweh.

One of these steps was to transport the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem and to enshrine it there as the central object of worship for the Israelite people. The ark supposedly had been brought by Moses from Egypt, and from time immemorial it had been the one sacred object that the Israelites acknowledged. A simple wooden chest, it had many associations for them: It may have contained copies of the law given at Sinai, it was certainly carried into battle by Israelites as a sign of the presence of Yahweh with them, and when it was present at any of the shrines of Israel it was believed that Yahweh was for the time being taking up abode in that particular shrine. But for over a generation this ark had been left to languish in a small town in the north of Israel. David made arrangements to bring it to Jerusalem, which he did with much singing and dancing and great joy. It is well to note, however, that David's act had political overtones as well as religious meaning. His aim was to make Jerusalem the religious as well as the political capital of his country and, by placing the ark in Jerusalem, he sought to link the newly created state to Israel's ancient faith and to advertise his position as the patron and protector of the sacred institutions of the past. In this, David was far wiser than Saul had been. Saul had neglected the ark and driven its priesthood into disrepute. David established the ark and its priesthood in the official national shrine, and this act did more to bind the loyalties of the tribes of Israel to Jerusalem than any of us can possibly imagine.

David also took steps to enrich the worship at the main sanctuary in Jerusalem. He himself was a musician, and under his influence new psalms were composed for liturgical use and old ones were gathered from all portions of the empire for the celebrations of the Temple. Later tradition credited him with establishing various guilds of musicians whose names have been preserved in our psalter. He was remembered fondly as the king whose piety set an example for the nation and whose devotion to his God led him to establish the worship of Yahweh as normative for the Kingdom.

How deeply Yahwism had become integral to the faith of David is a moot question, however. His Yahwistic loyalties were put to the test at the end of his reign when a struggle for succession broke out within his own family. On one side of the conflict stood his son Adonijah and on the other side his son Solomon. The contest was not only between two personalities: It was between the two ways of life that David had tried to bring together in Jerusalem. Adonijah was the Yahwist. Even his name indicated that; translated, it meant "My Lord is Yahweh." Adonijah had been born before David had become king of Jerusalem, at a time when David's loyalties had lain with the Yahwists of Israel and Judah, and the young prince gathered to his side important followers of David who dated back to the days before David had claimed Jerusalem as his own. Joab, the venerable general of David's armies, lined up beside Adonijah, as did Abiathar, a Yahwist priest who had served David from the beginning of his rise to power. But Solomon was a man of Jerusalem. He was born in Jerusalem after David had moved into the city and had lived there during his childhood and adolescence. His name was hardly even Hebraic, being instead a Canaanite version of the Hebrew word for shalom, or "peace." Those who supported his cause were solidly of the pre-Davidic Jerusalem bureaucracy: Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, Benaiah the captain of the king's personal body-guard, and behind them the machinating figure of Bathsheba, mother of Solomon, who wanted desperately to be queen mother of Israel. David had to make a choice between the contending parties, else his kingdom would disintegrate, and he opted for the part-Jebusite Solomon rather than the Yahwist Adonijah.

A decision such as that requires that we look hard and long at David in evaluating the accuracy of the traditions surrounding him. He was a kingdom builder without peer in Israelite history; there can be no question about that. At his death there was a powerful and united Israel that, at the time of his birth, had not even existed in the imagination of the most ambitious Israelite. But was the king who accomplished this dedicated to justice for his people, or was he following the political instincts that told him that the king must make a show of justice in order to be tolerated by a people who advanced concern for justice had originated with Moses and their patriarchs? Likewise, was he a convinced Yahwist whose ecstatic moments before the shrine of the ark grew from deep within his soul, or was he a political figure who knew that religion was good as a rallying point of the people, who chose a Canaanite over a Yahwist to be his successor and who redesigned the ancient covenant of the people of Israel along lines that brought the altar under control of the throne? Even today we can read the record of his kingship both ways: read the Scriptures of First and Second Samuel from the point of view that he was a king totally devoted to justice, and he becomes that as well. Again, from these same passages we can support the position that he was merely an oriental ruler who used religion when it suited his own purposes, or we can read it to see him as the deeply devoted Yahwist who steadfastly held to his faith even in times when he was to gain no personal profit from doing so.

There is no question, however, of the estimate of later Israel upon him. They idealized him into a just and God-fearing king who was the first to extend the kingdom of Israel to borders that they considered to be God-given. When the dynasty of this king was rejected in northern Israel, it continued with honor in his own homeland of Judah. These later generations of Judahites even began to fashion a hope for a messiah, anointed in the spirit and power of David, who

would restore the kingdom to its former greatness and at the same time bring into being a kingdom of righteousness whose just rulers and righteous people would make the God of David central to their lives. This hope for a messiah grew in intensity through the exile in Babylon, through the frustrating years of rebuilding the life of the nation in Jerusalem, and through the struggle to maintain a consistent and faithful Judaism in the face of the challenge of Persia, Greece, and Rome. When, a thousand years later, Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem, he was hailed as the son of David born in in David's own city, the messiah who would be a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to his own people Israel.