

Introduction to the David Story

From our childhood we have heard and read the story of King David. In this seminar we look again at this story from a different, non-religious perspective. Biblical scholars, Jewish and Christian, see King David as a *legendary* character, more based on fiction than fact. They see the two books of Samuel as a jumble of various oral traditions meant to explain how the people of Israel solidified their hold on the land of Canaan (present day Palestine) by switching from a loose confederation of tribes that had no central government to a monarchy that was able to achieve dominance over the land.

Robert Alter, a literary and Hebrew language scholar, takes a different approach. He sees, along with ancient Rabbis and a small contingent of contemporary Jewish scholars, the story of David as a *literary* document, mainly written by a single author, and artfully portraying key episodes in the story of the establishment of a hereditary monarchy in Israel.

This story, first written during the reign of David's son, Solomon, and edited again during the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century B.C.E., is more history than legend, because it discloses facts that reveal the ugliness of grasping and holding political power. As Johathan Wilso sums it up in his review: "David -- a shepherd boy with a talent for music and poetry -- turns himself into (as Alter puts it) the first Machiavellian Prince in literature."

Robert Alter suggests we liken the David story to the historical plays of Shakespeare, where the scheming, deceptive, and violent political behavior of royal family members are recounted in unvarnished detail. The episodes so reported may not have occurred as described in the story, but they are grounded in fact. The literary treatment of these episodes demonstrates their significance and elicits from us an emotional response.

Additionally, both in the Psalms and in the Story of David itself, David is lionized as a great warrior and as the father of all subsequent kings of Israel. God promises that every King of Israel will be a son (descendent) of David. Hopefully, this seminar may conclude that God's choice of David and the promise made concerning succession to his throne were apt, for we will see in the Story of David both the virtuous side of David's character and David's accomplishments as leader of His people.