

June 10, 2012

I Samuel 13:7-14
Acts 13:16-23
Psalm 89:19-29

KING DAVID'S GREATER SON

The scripture readings give us a hint of the regard in which King David is held. His place and position in the traditions of Judaism were not only great in his own time; they seem to gather weight and honor as time goes by. In Christendom much of this respect and honor transfers onto Jesus. The promises of God to preserve David's line and his throne forever are frequently understood as something to be fulfilled in Jesus' eternal and everlasting Kingdom. This is not a diminishment of King David, but rather a further honoring of his place and importance in our traditions. Clearly Judaism assumed that the Messiah would come as a direct descendant of King David. Despite all the mayhem and the civil war that split the tribes of Jacob into a northern and a southern kingdom – despite the endless defeats and decimation of the Jewish nation after David – the hope of Judaism was and is that one day another king in David's line would come to restore and reestablish Israel, and that Israel would then in turn bring peace and prosperity to the whole world. Much of this is embodied in the phrase – familiar to me, but perhaps not to all of you – “King David's greater son.”

Clearly there is a connection between King David and King Jesus. In many and various ways the two signify and represent the great gap between Old Covenant and New Covenant – between the hopes and promises of Judaism in contrast to the hopes and promises of Christianity. In reality this gap is full of confusion, haziness, strange assumptions, and false claims. Most people bounce back and forth between the two kings and all they represent. If we do this without realizing it, we can even be hoping in the promises of one realm without realizing that they only match the processes and approaches of the other realm. That means we need to back up and go slowly.

Did Jesus think very much about King David? Did He grow up knowing that David was His great, great, great (26 or 40 times) grandfather? Among the other heroes that Jesus pondered, did He consciously think about what it meant to follow in David's line? Of course, I assume that Jesus did think about such things. On the other hand, Jesus is strangely silent about His very famous ancestor. Are any of you silent about a famous and highly honored ancestor? Strange.

In Mark 12:35-37 (Matthew 22:41-46; Luke 20:41-44) Jesus seems to be challenging the connection between King David and the Messiah. David had said: *“The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’”* (Psalm 110:1) Jesus comments: *“David himself calls him ‘Lord’; how can he be David’s son?”* Perhaps Jesus is only playing games to confound the scribes and Pharisees. But aside from this enigmatic comment, Jesus never mentions His illustrious ancestor.

Sometimes others call Jesus the “Son of David” and He does not affirm or deny. This only makes it clear that the Jewish people did assume, as they began to think Jesus was the Messiah, that He must also be the Son of David. Mostly this happens when people are begging Jesus to heal them. Wanting such a favor, they do not hesitate to compliment Him with the highest title they know. But the more clearly we connect Jesus and David, the more tension we feel between these two great leaders. David was a man after God’s own heart, but Jesus, we say, was the Son of God. Both were great warriors, but in entirely different ways – and the more we think about it, for entirely different purposes. And while all of us are children of God, we use the phrase “Son of God” to mean and imply that Jesus was far closer to God than just another one of God’s ordinary children, like one of us. Quickly that stuns us coming and going. How do you get to a higher status than being a child of God’s? And why aren’t we closer to God? Jesus certainly seemed to be inviting us to come all the way in.

From an outer human perspective, God seems to have backed King David far better than God backed Jesus. The Crucifixion was a scandal. Without the Resurrection, it would have effectively wiped Christianity out of the picture and off the records. Even so, it remains troubling that God did not help Jesus to be effective, successful, rich, or powerful here on earth, at least not in any of the ways we long for and care about. God certainly did all of this for David. None of us seem to entirely abandon the hope that if we are faithful, a good and loving God will help us to achieve some of our goals here on earth. But Jesus’ story does not help us very much with that hope.

It is clear that as Christianity grew and spread, our concepts of the role of the Messiah were transformed dramatically. But it is equally clear that nobody expected the Messiah to be anything like Jesus or to have a life anything like Jesus’ life. After the Crucifixion and Resurrection, this began to change. But the fact remains that Jesus was a complete

surprise. His life and ministry were a complete surprise. The records make it very clear that this dumbfounded His closest followers clear up to and through the Crucifixion. And it kept most of Judaism from accepting Jesus as the Messiah from then down to this very day.

All of this is part of the very troubling contrast between King David and King Jesus. Perhaps Jesus loved and truly honored His great and famous sire. But Jesus also broke the mold of King David: He turned away from the patterns and approaches of King David, and showed zero interest in wanting to achieve any of the goals or purposes that David lived for. That is more than just interesting. That has far-reaching consequences for anybody who truly intends to follow Jesus.

David was arguably the greatest warrior who ever lived. I don't want to pass over that comment too quickly. We know of quite a few remarkable warriors. Some of them are mixtures of legend with fact. Perhaps David is too. Nevertheless, not counting the pure legends and the half-gods, we do know the names of many mighty warriors. Joshua, after whom Jesus was named, for instance. And Ulysses, Ashoka, Samson, Arjuna, and Fu Hao (the greatest female warrior, Shang Dynasty 1700 to 1600 B.C.) The closest warrior I can think of to David's prowess was Alexander the Great. But he died young; he was not tested over the span of years like David was.

In any case, David fought nearly all of his life. He fought as an individual warrior, he fought as a commander of armies, and he fought in circumstances everywhere in between. It started when he was a shepherd boy defending his sheep against bears and lions, and it escalated from there. As far as we know, David never lost a fight. As far as we know, David always assumed that his prowess was not his own, but was a gift and a destiny that came to him from God. He used it to take Israel from a semi-disorganized conglomerate of tribes, struggling to survive – with a ring of enemies on every side – to the most powerful and successful nation in the Middle East of his time. When David turned the kingdom over to his son Solomon, he ruled or controlled virtually all the territory between the Nile in the south to the Euphrates in the north.

Just so nobody thinks we are trying to sweep it under the rug: David's great and horrible sin was engineering the death of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband. Adultery with Bathsheba was bad. But trying to cover it up led to something even worse. That is ever our choice, is it not?

We face our mistakes, feel remorse, repent, seek forgiveness, try to make amends – or we keep making things worse and worse.

David did repent. But he was slow to do so this time, and so the damage was severe. We still might well ask: “What other huge blunders did David make?” Well, he was a magnificent king but couldn't seem to manage his own household. Many of us know that isn't as easy as it sounds. The members of his household, by the way, were not all helping; they were not all trying to make it easy. Something about court life, too many wives, and all the jockeying for position and favor – well, it's easier to go spend more time on the affairs of the country.

David did things not many of us would agree with. That does not necessarily mean he was wrong, or that anybody in his time would have considered them a sin. (II Samuel 8:2ff) Early in his kingship, David was fighting neighbors all around: Philistines, Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, Syrians, bands of raiders. After defeating the Moabite army, David had the survivors lie down on the ground. He then had them measured off by a length of cord. Those in the first two lengths of cord were killed, and those in the third length were spared; the next two lengths were killed, and the third length spared; and so on. Pretty barbaric, most of us would say. But David didn't want to have to fight them again and again. He was saving the lives of his soldiers. He left enough Moabites alive to till the fields and keep Moab running. But he never had to fight the Moabites again. They brought tribute to Israel each year, but they also knew they didn't have enough manpower to challenge David again. Nobody in David's time thought this was a sin. They thought it was brilliant, and even merciful. He did not kill them all. Besides, the Moabites had been trying to kill the Israelites.

David, as you know, was also a great poet, musician, and sincerely religious man who, despite a few slips, wanted more than anything in life to be faithful and to show devotion to God. His top dream was to build a temple for Yahweh. It was very difficult for people to know David very well and not love him. In fact, most of the nation did love him, very much indeed. He was certainly one of the best-loved kings in all history. Therefore all of Judaism has honored him, remembered him, and wished for someone like him to come along again. But as for those who fought along with him, they loved and trusted him beyond words to tell. Any one of them, it is said, would gladly and quickly have laid down their lives for him. In that way, at least, David and Jesus are not entirely dissimilar.

In any case, Jesus came along with a very different approach and a very different agenda. He was not trying to rule a geographical area. He never killed anybody. What is the phrase for it? “He would rather die first.” Jesus never went to war. In the end, He claimed to be the true and rightful King, but He didn’t back it with any weapons, soldiers, or physical threats of any kind. Many, by the way, were trying to persuade Jesus that an armed insurrection was the only way, saying: “If you are truly faithful, the numbers won’t matter – God will give you the victory.” Jesus knew the stories as well as any of them did. Sometimes it had been true; sometimes it had not. Even so, it had never lasted; it never worked for long. Regardless, Jesus clearly turned away from this pattern and approach.

Usually at this point someone trots out the incident when Jesus chased the money-changers out of the temple, but it doesn’t carry the weight they try to assign to it. Jesus did try to reform the temple, but mostly with words. He cracked a whip, but did the whip touch anybody? The money-changers ran. It was a violent scene, but a very mild form of violence – only enough to make His point. The temple was supposed to be a house of prayer. Jesus did not turn it into a bloodbath. What was the real scenario? It was Passover time. It was the last few days of Jesus’ life on earth. Palm Sunday had already taken place. There were always temple police on hand; why did they not interfere? They dared not: Jesus was at the height of His popularity; He had several thousand supporters behind Him. So the temple police dared not arrest Him or interfere. There was no contest, no real threat, no real danger of a confrontation. Why do we think the chief priests and elders had to find Jesus at night, and hold the trials and turn Jesus over to the Roman authorities in the early morning hours, before anybody caught on to what was happening? There was no armed insurrection planned. Jesus will only accept His Kingship by invitation – by our free choice and consent. The comparison and contrast between King David and King Jesus remain staggering!

Land from the Nile to the Euphrates – versus a Kingdom not of this world. The loyalty, devotion, and physical prowess of men trained and honed to be great warriors – David’s mighty men were legendary: the three, the ten, and the thirty; as it turned out, nobody could stand against them. In contrast: A band of twelve disciples turning into apostles, their only weapon a Message of forgiveness and love. Yet in a few years, they “conquered” more territory and more people than David’s empire had ever imagined. But “conquered” isn’t really the right word, is it? Freed and redeemed is more accurate.

So more than a few of us think that Jesus was a mighty warrior too – the mightiest who ever lived. Only, He was a spiritual warrior, who fought for spiritual values – and who fought adversaries that most normal humans cannot stand against for even a day. To win with David is a great victory that lasts for twenty or even thirty years. To win with Jesus is a far greater victory, and it lasts from here to eternity.

To be fair and accurate, most of the world still prefers King David and longs for a Messiah who will be far more like David than Jesus. Not everyone says so, to be sure. But as we all know, if you want to know what we really mean, you have to do more than listen to what we say; you have to watch what we do.

And yet, within the fellowship of an intentional band of Christian disciples, what happens to us if we muse for very long about these two greatest warriors of all time? David is the quintessential King Arthur, as good an earth hero as earth heroes ever get. I am, in fact, convinced that the legends of King Arthur are patterned after David. In any case, by great courage and great skill – and yes, by praying fervently to God all his life – King David achieved more than we can expect or hope from any normal human being.

And still, the difference between David and Jesus is astounding. We can hardly take it in; we can hardly fathom the many dimensions of difference. As broken and troubled as our world is, the response of our world to Jesus is indication that we are more than mere flesh and blood.

David stirs us greatly if we think very much about him and all he stands for. He is the emblem of the white knight in shining armor. He saves his nation and its people. He wins, against unbelievable odds, and he wins through to success and fame and honor. Thousands live better, safer, more productive lives because of him. Children grow up because of him. The land is productive and families prosper because of him.

On the other hand, I have never prayed to King David, nor have I asked him to help me in my prayers to God. I have never gone to David seeking insight or guidance or aid when my life was falling apart. I have never gone to David with my guilt or shame, trying desperately to find some new light, or forgiveness, or mercy, or a chance to start afresh. I have never turned to David when everything in this world, however beautiful, seemed foolish and transient and temporal. Though my life is small and in no way deserves to continue, Jesus has convinced me that, in ways I cannot understand, it is still valuable. And that the omnipotent

God, for unfathomable reasons, still loves me – and everyone around me as well. And mystery of mysteries, Jesus has also convinced me that beyond all I see and know, our lives are designed to be everlasting. King David touches none of these things and brings me none of these convictions.

Strangely enough, David loved and trusted God for at least a muted version of some of the same things I do. It is what I love about David most. But the way he lived, and what he lived for, does not lift those things up or enhance them in any way that inspires my own quest. Furthermore, David's vision did not go beyond Israel or this world's geography, or even to what would happen to his family and his nation after he was gone. In short, David seemed marvelous and wonderful to Israel, but I doubt that the Moabites were as thrilled by his perspective or his ethics or his God – even though their own gods and ethics and purposes were no better, or perhaps even not nearly as good.

Am I alone in such thoughts and responses? Not hardly! Thousands upon thousands of people down through the generations have turned to Jesus in ways they would never turn to David. Jesus helps us with things David cannot touch. Jesus helps us in ways that David does not know. David is an outstanding representative of the “way of the world.” Jesus is the embodiment of the “Way of the Spirit.” Jesus really is a far greater King, even though our world does not easily understand or follow His ways. Over and over we turn to Jesus for our deepest and most profound needs and wounds, our emptiness, our broken-hearted lives. Then as soon as we get new hope and feel new life within us, most of us revert to King David's more familiar ways.

It really is true: Jesus is a strange kind of hero – a strange kind of King – from our perspective. It is easier to cheer and honor an outer, physical sword than it is to see or declare allegiance to the sword of the Spirit. But then, that is at the very heart and core of why we need a Savior. The physical swords do not heal, but we and our whole world need healing. Only, the sword of the Spirit kills by converting, slays by giving us new Life, cuts away what is harming us most – and calls us to transfer all our allegiance to a King who wants blessing and LIFE and benefit for everyone as much as for us and for ours. And “Oh my God,” He even asks us to help make it so – to help bring in His Kingdom. Will we?

Some of you already are. I am starting to hear the stories, the incidents, the dawning awareness. It makes my heart very glad.