

## King David and the Illusory Judah

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See also: [\*The House of David: Between Political Formation and Literary Revision\*](#) (forthcoming, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016); and “Judah Bookends: The Priority of Israel and Literary Revision in the David Narrative,” *VT* 65/3 (2015): 401-413.

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Reading the story of King David, we have always assumed the primacy of David’s connection with Judah. The Bible tells a clear story, or so it seems—David became king of Judah first (2 Sam. 2:4), then king of Israel (2 Sam. 5:1-3). In the past decade, archaeologists and biblical scholars alike have pushed this notion further to argue that David was king of Judah alone (e.g., see Jacob Wright’s article “[David, King of Judah \(Not Israel\)](#)”). Literary historians have recently proposed that the oldest material in the David narrative in 1–2 Samuel is focused only on David and Judah (e.g. Fischer, 2004; Kratz, 2005; Wright, 2014). This early David lore would have no connection to Saul, or to David’s rule over Israel. In this scheme, the material focused on Israel would be added after the fall

of the Northern Kingdom (ca. 720 BCE), at which point Judah would claim the identity of Israel. This post-720 BCE, Israel-centered David story would address communities in the north and reflect a Judahite desire for a unified kingdom under the Davidic dynasty.

The difficulty with this reconstruction is that Judah appears remarkably few times as an acting political group (what I refer to as a polity) in 1–2 Samuel. Judah is generally attested as a population or a geographical area, particularly during David’s escapades in the south while fleeing from Saul in 1 Samuel. Such a population is never envisioned as a unified polity, but rather as roaming or disconnected peoples who take their name from the southern geographical region. Where Judah appears as a polity, it is within the framework of editorial statements regarding “Israel and Judah,” or in the context of categorical information, such as numbers of troops. In the books of Samuel, the centrality of Judah as an active player is limited to two key sections, both in 2 Samuel: David’s anointing as king over Judah in 2 Sam. 2:4a, and Judah’s dominance at the end of the story of Absalom’s revolt and the beginning of Sheba’s rebellion (2 Sam. 19:9bβ–15, 16b–18a; and 19:41–20:5). These are the sole sections in the Saul-David and David material that contain a concentrated focus on Judah as an acting political body. In both sections, Judah is identified specifically with David. In between these two sections in 2 Samuel, there are ten additional references to Judah, all of which are

dependent upon and secondary to the core narrative (for more on the scattered references to Judah in 1-2 Samuel that are left out of this discussion, see Leonard-Fleckman, 2015 and 2016).

If the Judah material were indeed primary to the David story, the story would collapse from lack of self-standing, independent lore. Very rarely does Judah play an active role, and very few Judah references are integral to the narrative. In both cases in which Judah is central, the polity seems to materialize out of nowhere and evaporate just as quickly, leaving David's rule of Israel as the dominant story line. In 2 Samuel 2, Judah's anointing of David is fronted to a section that is otherwise entirely focused on David's struggle to win over Israel. In 2 Samuel 19–20, Judah enters in at the end of the story, in the context of David's return to Jerusalem from Mahanaim across the Jordan. These two blocks of Judah material transform a broader story line that otherwise does not even distinguish between the constituents of the struggle as "Israel" and "Judah." As such, the Judah material interrupts the flow of the narrative, shifting and reorienting the direction of the story in favor of Judah. The fact that Judah is so rarely seen is notable, for if the Judah material is indeed primary to the David story, and if David is identified so particularly with Judah, then where is Judah?

One possible answer lies in the House of David, which is often identified with Judah in the biblical sources and is associated with the ruling family. In fact,

the House of David (not Judah) is our first extrabiblical witness to the Southern Kingdom, attested in the ninth-century Aramaic Tel Dan Inscription. This inscription pairs the northern kingdom of Israel with the House of David (*byt dwd*) to its south. Most discussions about the inscription assume that the House of David is synonymous with Judah or the Davidic dynasty centered in Jerusalem, and most biblical examples of the House of David corroborate this assumption. These biblical references are driven by a considerably later theological vision of the “true kings” of Judah descending from the line or House of David, a house that is inextricably linked to Jerusalem and that participates in the divine plan through the rule of a divinely anointed king.

However, three references to the “House of David” are independent from this theological vision, two of which happen to be the only references to the “House of David” in the David story. The first reference appears in conjunction with the House of Saul in 2 Sam. 3:1 (repeated in v. 6): “The war was long between the House of Saul and the House of David; and David was growing stronger, while the House of Saul was growing weaker.” This is the first reference to the House of Saul in the books of Samuel; as such, Saul’s “house” represents Saul’s dynastic line after his death. In contrast, the context for the House of David does not match other dynastic expressions of this terminology; rather, it depicts David himself and the small body politic that supports him, though without

connection to Judah and without suggestion of a dynastic “house” bound to Jerusalem. The same is true of the second attestation, not to the House of David but to David’s “house” in 2 Sam. 15:16a. In this case, David leaves Jerusalem with his “house” or group of supporters (who again are independent from Judah), when his rule of Israel is threatened.

Following the story of David as king in 2 Samuel, the House of David reemerges in the third reference in 1 Kings 12, in conjunction with Israel’s final rejection of the Davidic line (Rehoboam). Israel calls to Rehoboam to “look to your own house” (v. 16), and only Judah follows the House of David (v. 20). The remainder of the Israel coalition chooses another line, that of Jeroboam of Israel. This narrative envisions the creation of Judah through its adherence to the House of David, which recaptures the idea from 2 Sam. 3:1 that the House of David is originally separate from the polity of Judah. However, unlike 2 Sam. 3:1, the story of the birth of two kingdoms in 1 Kings 12 concretizes the notion that the House of David is linked specifically to Jerusalem.

Based on these particular references in 2 Sam. 3:1; 15:16a; and 1 Kgs. 12:16, 20, the “House of David” terminology has a greater breadth of meaning than previously imagined. These attestations depict the early House of David as a small, geographically mobile political body, which is comprised of the social house of David (i.e. his wives, etc.), as well as his “men” (language that ties back to 1

Samuel 22–30). Jerusalem is depicted as the single, central town of the House of David only in 1 Kings 12, while in 2 Samuel 2–5 and 15–19 David and his house migrate from Hebron in the south to Jerusalem to Mahanaim across the Jordan, then back to Jerusalem.

In contrast to the sparse references to Judah and the House of David in 2 Samuel, the majority of the story of David as king is focused on David's rule of Israel alone. From David's struggle to become king over Israel (2 Samuel 2–5) to his struggle to maintain rule in the Absalom-Sheba rebellions (2 Samuel 15–20), the preoccupation is David's right to rule Israel. If the Israel material were indeed added after the fall of the Northern Kingdom (ca. 720 BCE), then almost the entirety of the narrative would be invented from scratch after this time. One immediate concern with this proposal is how to explain the sudden, post-720 BCE identification with Israel, if Judah had no traditional basis for this identification at any level prior to the fall of Israel. From where did it emerge?

Indeed, I find it curious that when we conceptualize narrative development in the ancient world, we tend to draw clear lines before and after certain dates, as if a post-720 BCE or a postexilic boundary for a certain literary stratum or redaction would be impermeable. These restrictions are illusory. Certain biblical texts, such as Isa. 8:14, which refers to the “two houses of Israel,” support the notion that Judah would have understood itself as bound up with Israel prior to 720 BCE,

during the existence of two kingdoms in the ninth–eighth centuries (Williamson, 2011). During this time, Judah likely understood its own history as enfolded in that of Israel as the larger and more powerful kingdom.

Moreover, the landscape in 2 Samuel, which is contained in the central highlands, does not fit the reality of Israel’s political landscape following the ninth-century BCE northern expansion. In the narrative, there is no clean geographical division between “Israel” and “Judah,” and Israel does not extend north of the Jezreel Valley. Rather, the narrative envisions “Israel” as a limited body politic operating in the central highlands and utilizing the Transjordan (Mahanaim) and the far south (Hebron) as temporary, liminal bases of power. With the exception of Sheba’s rebellion in 2 Samuel 20, none of these stories mentions the far northern territories. Insofar as the narrative of David as king is focused in the central highlands, it reflects a limited Israelite geography prior to the ninth-century northern expansion. The location of Jerusalem is key, not as the dominant settlement of the south, but as a logical alternative capital of Israel. Situated side by side with Gibeah of Saul, Jerusalem is nonetheless independent from Saul’s sphere of influence while maintaining an eye to the south.

In addition, the narrative perceives Israel as a collective, mobile body politic rather than a division of groups or tribes. This political body is separate from David and any particular dynastic line, and is capable of rejecting or choosing its

king. This political characterization of Israel would be foreign to the Jerusalem-centric kingdom of Judah in the late eighth or seventh century, and arguably part of the actual kingdom of Israel rather than the experience of Judah. If the Israel material in the David narrative were created after 720 BCE, then this material should demonstrate ultimate ignorance of an earlier Israelite political and geographical landscape. Yet the David material does not. Building from the evidence, including Judah's absence, Israel's dominance as a body politic, and the restricted geographical landscape, the logical conclusion is that these stories about King David derive, at least in part, from a Judahite perspective prior to the northern expansion. Therefore, the fascinating question is how Judah could see itself bound up in the story of David as king of Israel while Israel still existed as a rival kingdom *not* ruled by David's line.

The biblical evidence leads me to two proposals, which I argue in detail in my forthcoming book: first, the House of David predates Judah as the collective political group affiliated with David. Second, Israel is primary to the literary development of the David story, while the "Judah additions" are secondary and serve to reorient the narrative in favor of Judah. I view two main, extended processes or "phases" of literary composition in the narrative of David as king in 2 Samuel. The primary phase develops the story of David as king of Israel and represents the majority of the David material in 2 Samuel. In this primary phase,



Judah claims its heritage as part of Israel through the story of its leader, David, and potentially stakes a claim on the rival kingdom of Israel. This phase no doubt contains various stages of editing and redaction, including the incorporation of earlier, independent materials that take for granted David's rule in relation to Israel. The development of this primary phase potentially spanned a period of time that began prior to the creation of two kingdoms and continued after the fall of the north. Yet the narrative of David as king of Israel would have predated the editorial attempt to create the extensive account of the early monarchy in Samuel-Kings, an attempt that would have sought to include Judah in the story of David.

The House of David as a political body is central to this primary phase of development as part of David's struggle to rule Israel. In the later "Judah additions," both in 2 Samuel and in 1 Kings 12, Judah is always treated as separate from this political "house." Moreover, the "House of David" appears as a political description for David only when he is not ruling over Israel; thus the "House of David" appears in 2 Sam. 3:1, when David is struggling to become king of Israel; in 2 Sam. 15:16a, when his rule is threatened; and in 1 Kgs. 12:16-20, in the introduction to the two-kingdom narrative. As such, Israel is the primary political body throughout the narrative, while the "House of David" preserves an identity for David only when he cannot be identified with Israel. Throughout the narrative, Israel is depicted as a people separate from David, a people not simply ruled but

acting as a body to choose or reject a king. This political character is arguably part of the actual kingdom of Israel and is not the experience of the Southern Kingdom, especially when it comes to choosing or rejecting a dynastic line.

The secondary phase of development centers on David as king of Israel *and* Judah, which shifts the framework of the narrative toward the priority of Judah's relationship to David. This shift irrevocably alters the logic of the narrative from David's rule of Israel to David's struggle to rule over Israel and Judah, which is an idea about two kingdoms, regardless of when the Judah additions actually took place. The Judah additions are concentrated in two particular sections of the David story: 2 Sam. 2:4a and 19:9b $\beta$ –15, 16b–18a; 19:41–20:13, which together create “Judah bookends” that shift the priority of Israel to Judah. This secondary phase of textual growth is self-conscious about the southern realm as “Judah,” and Israel is never the name for the Southern Kingdom. Rather, Judah steps into the role of David's primary political relation and loyal kin, which grants Israel the role of the wild card. These two distinct roles for Israel and Judah are most apparent in 2 Samuel 19–20, which draws Judah into the narrative and transforms Absalom's revolt into a revolt of Israel against David, in which the people “Judah” are depicted as David's loyal followers. Then, 2 Sam. 2:1-4a, the story of Judah anointing David, is the only other textual unit to present Judah as an active political body. This “Judah addition” is fronted to a section that culminates in the anointing

of David as king over Israel in 2 Sam. 5:1–3, and reshapes the narrative so that the anointing over Judah appears to be central.

This secondary phase in the development of the text reveals the changing political and social situation within the Southern Kingdom. The subtle reorientation toward Judah may have been formed in part by the exile, and the sudden need to create space for Judah within a story about David so focused on “Israel,” a polity that no longer existed. The books of Kings and other prophetic texts reflect this reality in very carefully delineating between Israel and Judah, while focusing primarily on Judah. Certainly, this secondary phase would have taken place no later than the attempt to bring together the books of Samuel-Kings into a cohesive account. This could be a “Deuteronomistic” project, or the contribution of later writers. The book of Kings, focused as it is on a two-kingdom framework and written from a Judahite perspective, would have necessitated these Judah additions in order to create a narrative of the kingdoms that extended from the books of Samuel through Kings. Yet this shift toward Judah may also have begun in the late preexilic period, as suggested by those who argue for a preexilic setting for the creation of the books of Kings. At some point after the northern kingdom of Israel ceased to exist, Judah was left as the remaining kingdom. Rather than claim “Israel” as its own name after the dissolution of that kingdom, perhaps Judah was left to carve out a niche for itself, “Judah.”

Finally, 1 Kings 12 further corroborates the notion of Israel as a collective separate from its kings. The story portrays Israel with the same political accuracy as is found in the core David material under discussion. However, 1 Kings 12 is not directly linked to the literary collection pertaining to the time of David, and needs to be treated separately from literary-historical theories of development in the David story. 1 Kings 12 explicitly accounts for two separate kingdoms in depicting Israel's rejection of David's house while distinguishing the House of David from Judah. In 1 Kgs. 12:16, David's house is compared with Israel as two separate political groups, while vv. 19–20 associate the House of David with the individual ruler, Rehoboam, and with Jerusalem as its sole central base. The text is directly concerned with explaining the existence of two kingdoms in which only one remains tied to David. It is independent of both the Solomon lore in 1 Kings 1-11 and the narrative of two kingdoms that begins in 1 Kings 14, though it serves to introduce the latter. First Kings 12 therefore provides us with the example of a southern writer accounting for coexistence with a larger northern kingdom, a need that could make sense when both kingdoms are active.

Biblical scholars have long since used the Bible to ask historical questions of ancient Israel. Yet the assumed framework for understanding the Bible's relationship to history needs to be reconsidered. There is room for fresh analysis of the David narrative with history in view, an analysis that pays adequate attention to

the narrative and its foundations, without becoming trapped in simplistic traditional readings of the text. My questions are ultimately historical, yet history is an elusive category, particularly when dealing with ancient witnesses, and I treat these sources cautiously insofar as they may contain useful historical information. Philip Davies has argued that the ancient Israel presented in the Bible is entirely a Judahite product from the Persian period, and, unlike the “historical” Israelite kingdom centered in Samaria, this ancient Israel never actually existed (Davies, 2002, 2007). Davies’s perspective is important in acknowledging that the “biblical Israel” is a fabrication, and that it maintains an uncertain relationship to the historical Israel and to related ancient histories of this period. Yet the clear-cut idea that a biblical Israel either exists or does not seems to treat biblical stories as capable of simple proof or disproof, rather than letting them be examined for potential historical interest in various shades and dimensions. The biblical evidence invites us to reconsider the political and social landscape of the early monarchy, defined neither by a united monarchy in the tenth–ninth centuries, nor by a clear political division between Israel and Judah at this time, but by the one important entity in these centuries: Israel.

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