

# The Idea of a Nation

Hespeler, July 4 2021 © Scott McAndless

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10, Psalm 48, 2 Corinthians 12:2-10, Mark 6:1-13

**D**id you notice something as we read from the Old Testament this morning? I don't know about you, but for me it was unmistakable. Something changed; something just clicked. Now, I will admit that maybe it was just me. Maybe the click just happened in my own head and it was so loud that I thought everyone could hear it. Because, you see, I am a bit of a historian. I actually have a bachelor degree in history. That does give me an awareness of something that others might not notice. And what I noticed, as I read this passage, was that we had suddenly entered an era of documented history.

## Independent Confirmation

You see, when it says, **“So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel,”** there is something different about that statement from any other biblical statements that go before it. You see, David is the first person in the Bible for whom we have independent confirmation of his existence. That is to say, he is the first individual in the Bible for whom we have extra-biblical evidence. I mean, there have been some archaeological discoveries that confirm a few things older than David – the existence of certain cities or population groups – but nothing that you could use as evidence that a certain person existed.

But, for David, we have that. We don't exactly have proof of the existence of David himself, but there are ancient inscriptions that have been uncovered that refer to something called the House of David. So we know for sure that there was a dynasty of ancient kings who traced the foundation of their rule to a man named David. That is about all we can prove about the man, and I know that might not seem like much, but it's really quite significant for that time and place.

## The City of David

And there is a little bit more that we can say. Our reading goes on to describe how **“David occupied the stronghold, and named it the city of David. David built the city all around from the Millo inwards.”** As you read on, it becomes clear that this is a reference to David establishing his capital at a little place called Jerusalem. You might have heard of it.

And archaeologists have found evidence of some ancient construction near the top of Mount Zion in Jerusalem that seems to correspond to that period of time. In particular, they have discovered a large retaining wall that they have identified as the Millo that is mentioned in this passage. It was apparently considered to be quite



an engineering feat at the time as it is mentioned several times in the Bible.

## Even a Date

And if you put all of that together, we actually even have a date. If David is the guy responsible for the construction of what is called the City of David, then we can say that he must have ruled in Jerusalem in about the year 1,000 BC. If you ever want to impress people at a party with your biblical knowledge, pull out that one! It's easy to remember and the first confirmed date in the Bible: 1,000 BC.

Now, some of you – maybe especially those of you who don't get excited by history – may be saying "So what? What does it matter that something has been confirmed by extra-biblical sources? After all, just because something isn't mentioned outside of the Bible doesn't mean that it didn't happen." And, yes, that is absolutely true. But it does mean something. It means that, with the story of David, we finally have something concrete that we can hold up and compare to the biblical account.

## The Traces of David's Kingdom

The Bible does say many things about the rule of King David. Of course, we are not going to find historical evidence for every little detail, but we should be able to find some corroboration. In particular, the Bible says that David established a very large kingdom that united all of the tribes of Israel over a large territory for the very first time – a united kingdom that endured during his life and the life of his son Solomon before coming apart and never being reunited. Now that is an enormous achievement for that time and place.

What's more, it is the kind of administration that you might expect to leave significant traces in the archaeological record. If there was such a united kingdom in David's time, we ought to be able to find the traces of it. And so, of course, archaeologists have searched for those traces. And, news alert, they haven't found them.

On the contrary, they find that there was very little in the way of political unity in the area at the time. As a result, most scholars and archaeologists would say that the evidence seems to indicate that, if David was a real person and he ruled in Jerusalem, his kingdom was probably more of a chieftainship and likely didn't extend all that far from Mount Zion. It seems that, as time went by, kings in the line of David looked back on the time of David and Solomon as a great golden age and so, kind of naturally, they exaggerated the size and importance of that kingdom.

## The Idea of a United Kingdom

So there really is little evidence of a united kingdom under David. But I will tell you something that there is a lot of evidence for, and that is for the *idea* of that united kingdom. For much of its history after 1,000 BC, there were two kingdoms in the land of Israel – the Kingdom of Israel in the north and the Kingdom of Judah in the south. And for much of that time, the northern kingdom was by far the largest, strongest and most prosperous of the two. The kingdom of Judah in the south was really a runt of a kingdom. But the southern kingdom had Jerusalem and it had the House of David in charge.

And it seems clear that the idea that there had been a united kingdom under the rule of David and Solomon was established and grew in that southern Kingdom of Judah. Based on this idea, yes, the rulers of the House of David did claim that they should also rule over the people in the north. This claim became even more insistent when the northern kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrian Empire and, in a seeming miracle, the southern kingdom just barely managed to survive.

At that time, prophets such as the great Prophet Isaiah proclaimed that the time had finally come to re-establish the united kingdom, though it never actually happened. Over time, the idea of a united kingdom became linked to the idea that the temple in Jerusalem was the only place where people could correctly worship Yahweh, the God of Israel.

## The Idea Outlives the House of David

The idea of the united kingdom continued even once the ruling House of David ceased to exist after the Babylonian exile. When the exiles returned from Babylon, many of them returned with the idea that God had sent them back to rebuild the old kingdom of David, even if it didn't really work out that way. Centuries later, the Hasmonean kings, who did not claim to be descended from David, still wanted to re-establish his kingdom and entered into a war of conquest to bring Galilee under Judean control.

In fact, to this very day the idea of David's kingdom has been a driving force behind the modern Israeli state, especially in the establishment of Israeli settlements in occupied territory. Of course, this has often rendered the hope for peace in that part of the world somewhat complicated.

So, it is kind of amazing, when you think about it, that the very idea of the kingdom of David and Solomon had more influence on the future course of history than did the actual reality of those kingdoms on the ground. But, as I think of it, maybe that is not so strange after all. In fact, I think that is how it always works and it's not necessarily a bad thing.

## National Days of Celebration

We gather today just three days after Canada Day, and we also gather on the American Independence Day. And there has been a lot of discussion this year about how or even if people ought to celebrate Canada Day, especially because, over the last couple of months, we have been confronted in a particularly graphic way with some of the failures and shortcomings of our country, particularly in regards to our relationship with indigenous people and the residential school system. And there doesn't seem to be anything to celebrate about that.

As for our good American neighbours, I'm quite sure that they would never tone down their patriotic celebrations today, but there is no doubt that the past year may have tarnished the image that many of them have of their country when you think of the events that prompted the Black Lives Matter movement, a terrible pandemic experience and an insurrection at the nation's capital.

As I think of these celebrations and of how the idea of David's kingdom was bigger than the kingdom itself probably was, it makes me ask the question today, what exactly do we celebrate when we celebrate a nation?

## Looking Critically at our Past

I know there are some who really struggle with the idea of looking at our past with a critical eye. This is because we have long associated the idea of our country with a glorified view of that past. We have looked to stories of heroic settlers heading out into the clearings, to visionary leaders like John A. Macdonald and Edgerton Ryerson, to brave leaders like Generals Wolf and Brock to tell us who we were and what we stood for.

But, if that is who we are, that makes any act of looking critically at those heroes feel very dangerous. It makes any act of looking back feel dangerous because very few people or policies of the past will stand up against our present-day sensibilities. So, all of a sudden, indigenous people asking to have their experiences heard and validated or maybe just historians doing their jobs feels like people are attacking our patriotic spirit. But I do not believe that we should be afraid of history, and we certainly should not be afraid of the truth of our history.

In many ways, our idea of our country has been based on an idealized picture of our past, as romanticized, in some ways, as the united kingdom under David. But just because that past was not as ideal as we may have thought it was, just because it turns out that we may have blinded ourselves to some of its flaws, does that mean that the idea does not have a purpose?

## An Idea of Canada

I do have an idea of a Canada – a Canada that takes care of its people, all of its people. I have an idea of a Canada where we do not value people less because of their race or their origins. I have an idea of a country where we value and care for the land and honour those who have lived in relationship with it for thousands of generations. That is my idea of Canada. I suspect that it is God's idea as well.

Did that ideal Canada exist in the past? No, certainly not in entirety and there have been many cases when we fell far, far short of that idea. Does that ideal Canada exist in the present? Well, I'm afraid I have to say that the answer there is also no. But that doesn't mean that it's not the real Canada. The idea is real and, if we commit ourselves and if we work at it, if we really work at it, that idea will begin to align more closely to the reality on the ground in the future because, I believe, that is where my idea of Canada will be found – in the future, and in my heart. Where will yours be found?