David: King, Prophet, Repentant Sinner. Martin Luther’s Image of the Son of Jesse

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ABSTRACT. In his preaching and exegetical lectures Martin Luther frequently employed biblical figures as examples of God’s action of calling people to repentance and showing them his mercy, and he also used these figures as models for Christian living. In his writings King David appears as the author of psalms that proclaim God’s Word and lead his people in praise; an ancestor of Messiah; a classical example of repentance in 2 Samuel 11-12 and Psalm 51; a model for Christian living as a ruler (Psalm 82); an instructor in how to read the Bible (especially in Psalm 119). Luther aimed at cultivating the Christian life of repentance, trust in Christ, David’s descendent, and obedience to God’s commands and calling by retelling in summary form elements of David’s life.

KEY WORDS: Martin Luther, David, narrative, use of repentance (David as example), mirror of princes (David as model ruler)

Martin Luther believed that “the whole life of the Christian is a life of repentance”, as he wrote in the first of his Ninety-five Theses on Indulgences of 1517.¹ Scholars debate what the words meant in 1517,² but by 1529 he wrote clearly in his Small Catech-

¹ WA 1:233, 10-11, LW 31:25.
² Volker Leppin, “‘Omnem vitam fidelium penitentiam esse voluit’, Zur Aufnahme mystischer Tradition in Luthers erster Ablaßthese”, Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte 93 (2003): 7-25, demonstrates that in 1517 Luther was echoing the thirteenth century theologian Johannes Tauler’s conviction re-
ism, as he explained how God’s baptismal action is repeated in daily repentance, that “the old creature in us with all sins and evil desires is ... drowned and dies through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand a new person ... comes forth and rises up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever”. Luther believed that God’s Word actually conveys his power into the lives of his people (Romans 1:17) and that in, its oral, written, and sacramental forms, the gospel of Jesus Christ actually accomplishes God’s will in recreating sinners into children of God.

Luther also took very seriously the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of the baptized. Because he did so, he cultivated daily repentance as the believer’s way of life. In this kind of life God’s prescriptions for the way his children were designed to live—Luther designated this code for human performance as “law”—bring his people to sorrow over their sin, so that they cling to God’s word of promise that he would save his people through the atoning work of Jesus Christ—Luther designated this promise in Christ as “gospel”. In this way God the Holy Spirit daily draws people away from their sinfulness to himself and into a life of service and love toward him and his creation. God has designed this life, according to Luther, to serve God, above all through hearing and study of his Word as well as praise to his name, and to serve the neighbor, in the context of


4 See Robert Kolb, Martin Luther, Confessor of the Faith (Christian Theology in Context series; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 131-151, and idem, with Charles P. Arand, The Genius of Luther’s Theology. A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 175-203.
God’s callings to support one another in home and economic activities, in society, and in the congregation of believers.⁵

Luther used his podium in the lecture hall and his pulpits in the churches of Wittenberg to deliver the prescription of God’s law and the life-restoring word of the gospel. From podium and pulpit he used a number of ways of communicating God’s Word to his hearers. Among these ways was the retelling of the biblical stories of the ancient people of God. The reformer recited these stories and his application of them with imagination and theological discipline, in order to cultivate a life of trust in God’s gift of forgiveness and life in Christ, repentance for sin, and obedience to God’s commands for daily life. Among the figures whose Luther repeated in order to do this for his German contemporaries was King David.

Preachers and professors in the Reformation era and in the period often called “Protestant Orthodoxy” took up themes from David’s life often although, apart from studies of their exegesis of the psalms,⁶ not much scholarly discussion of their use of his image has taken place.⁷ Other figures, above all Abraham, also a favorite of Luther and many of his contemporaries, have won some scholarly examination of their roles in the sermons

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and exegetical lectures of the early modern period.\(^8\) This essay will survey Luther’s use of David and how David appeared in his teaching and preaching as proclaimer of God’s Word and a model for Christian repentance and obedience.

The King of Israel whose psalms engaged Luther throughout most of his life had a definite character and definite characteristics in the mind of the Wittenberg reformer. In 1526 he composed a commentary on four psalms of comfort, among them Psalm 62. In its introductory pages David’s picture emerged in some detail. He was “a man of considerable training and experience. While he was being brought up and trained at King Saul’s court, he had seen much corruption. The nobles at court curried the king’s favor for the sake of money and honor … Therefore David himself had to take many hard knocks from them when they saw that the king was hostile to him and wanted to kill him”\(^9\). Luther imagined that when David wrote in the first verse of the psalm that God alone was his salvation, he was thinking of his own situation when the stealthy son of Doeg tried to curry his favor (2 Samuel 1:1-10, Luther followed tradition in identifying this anonymous person as Doeg’s son) or when Saul’s favor turned to hostility (1 Samuel 18). For he knew well how friends could turn away from him, as they did when King Saul’s favor vanished, and then could salute him when he assumed power.\(^10\) That sufficed as an application of the psalm’s depiction of the king.

Luther’s preaching, lecturing, and writing illustrated five themes on the basis of David’s life and writings: he appeared there as:


\(^9\) *WA* 19:571, 3-9; *LW* 14:231.

\(^10\) *WA* 19:523, 6-24, 575, 1-576, 2; *LW* 14:232-235.
1. The author of psalms that proclaim God’s Word and lead his people in praise.
2. An ancestor of Messiah.
3. A classical example of repentance in 2 Samuel 11-12 and Psalm 51.
5. An instructor in how to read the Bible (especially in Psalm 119).

Luther had learned the psalms by heart as a monk through the daily repetition of their texts in daily worship. He knew the rhythm of their song of life and incorporated the worldview of the psalmists into his way of thinking. Although he lectured on Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy and on many of the prophetic books of the Old Testament, and preached sermon series on Genesis, he dedicated no lecture series and no sermon entirely to the David stories in 2 Samuel. Nonetheless, he took these stories into account when he focused on David in his treatment of certain psalms and other portions of Scripture.

David, the Author of Psalms
Luther sometimes mentioned David’s name as he spoke of the author of a psalm on which he was preaching or lecturing. David served for him as the cantor of God’s people, proclaiming God’s will and leading his people in praise. Luther’s commentary on Psalm 147 of 1531 provides examples of this use, which David appears as no more than the man behind the words on the page. In this way David interjected his words of comfort against the fears and assaults which Christian’s experience, for example, when Luther preached on John 20:19, as edited in the Church Postil of 1526. The preacher cited Psalm 139:7-10 and Psalm 4:8 to recall how David depicted the faith of God’s people, which rests confidently in the protection of their God.

12 WA 10, 1, 2:20-29.
Luther was convinced that the psalms reflected David’s own experience. He told his hearers in 1531 that psalms such as Psalm 89 reflect David’s joy and thanks at hearing the prophet Nathan’s promise that Christ would be born of his body in addition to God’s gift of a dynasty and a kingdom (2 Samuel 7). Likewise, expressions of his thanks for forgiveness of his sins reflected the king’s own experience with the consolation he had received from such forgiveness (2 Samuel 12).

In 1530, as the Wittenberg reformer awaited word from the diet of Augsburg, which he could not attend under threat of arrest as a heretic and outlaw, Luther composed a commentary on Psalm 117, where he found several sides of David’s piety exhibited. David’s life served as an example of the believer’s suffering the attacks which Satan lodges against God’s kingdom. David’s faith was assaulted by the knowledge of the seriousness of his sin and the threat of death and the devil, but he confessed in Psalm 119:92 that because God’s law was his delight, he would not perish under such attacks. He also exhibited the concern for the pagans by calling on them to praise the Lord. In his sermon on Christ’s ascension into heaven in 1534, Luther reminded his hearers of David’s words in Psalm 68 to reinforce the triumph that was proclaimed in Christ’s ascending to the right hand of the Father. Luther was grateful for the example of David as the servant of God who proclaimed the Word of the Lord in the midst of the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of God’s chosen people, in the midst of ordinariness and tawdriness of the reality of daily life.

16 WA 37:21-24; cf. *Dr. Martin Luther’s sämmtliche Werke* 5 (Frankfurt/Main and Erlangen: Heyder and Zimmer, 1865), 5:139-142. Luther’s student and editor, Andreas Poach, often elaborates the notes of the amanuensis, Georg Rörer, but Poach did know Luther well enough to provide more or less reliable elaborations.
David, Ancestor of the Messiah

Luther was convinced that David knew prophetically that God’s deliverance would come through his own descendent, the Messiah. In commenting on Psalm 51 he observed that David did not think of God “vaguely”—in the abstract terms of “Turks, Jews, or papists”—who do not adhere to the external revelation of God’s Word, by which God revealed himself in Christ. Therefore, when we lose Christ, we lose God, for “apart from him there is no other God who is to be worshiped or sought”.17

Luther found Christ speaking and spoken of throughout the psalms. One of his favorite psalms was Psalm 110, which he interpreted consistently as a messianic prophecy. In his exposition of verse 1 in 1535, he confessed Christ as “a truly human creature, natural flesh and blood from David, so that David can and must call him his son”. This psalm prophesied that the promised Christ was to be of David’s seed.18 But David did not boast of this, Luther asserted. Despite the fact that the king had served his people and God well—he had been “an outstanding hero and warlord, with many victories and successes to his credit”—“he rejoices and glories only in the fact that he has a Lord whom he can call his own Lord in a special sense, because God promised David that this Lord should be one of his descendants. Knowing that all things will be made subject to Christ, David rejoices and is willing to become his subject as well”.19

Luther elaborated on David’s praise for the coming Christ, but he particularly admired the king’s faith. He forgot about his own royal glory and honor and confessed his Lord. Ignoring his own magnificence and majesty, since it would pass away, David said, in Luther’s imagination, “In my flesh and blood, to be born of me, will come he who is the true Son of God, and in this same flesh and blood he will be seated at the right hand of God.

17 WA 40, 2:387, 19-27.
19 WA 41:84, 30-85, 19; LW 13:232.
to be Lord of all”. Luther commented that David was “eager to pour out of his heart this kind of joy and boasting, to share it with everyone, so that we may also believe this about this Lord, make the same boast, and become as full of joy as he was in his heart … If we had David’s faith, this joy would surely be in us. With this joy we would have certain comfort and the strength to defy all the attacks of sin, death, the devil, and the world. For whoever believes steadfastly that he has as his Lord the one who sits on high and who is of our flesh and blood, cannot despair or be disheartened by sin”. 20 Luther wanted to direct David’s words to the hearts of his own hearers in Wittenberg.

Toward the end of his own life, in 1543, Luther turned to what he regarded as the “last will and testament” of David, 2 Samuel 23:1-7, as a response particularly to Jewish exegetes’ arguments against Christian claims that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of David, who came to deliver his people from sin and death. On the basis of verse one the reformer’s argument begins with the observation that David modestly introduces his speech as “the son of Jesse”. “He does not boast of his circumcision, nor of his holiness, nor of his kingdom, but he identifies himself simply as the son of Jesse. He is not ashamed of his lowly descent, that he was a shepherd. Yes, what is much more, he confesses his birth, in which he, like all people, came forth full of sin and death, for he wants to speak of other matters, which are so lofty that no nobility or holiness is of use, and no misery, nor sin, nor death, can damage them”. 21

But, Luther commented, David immediately identifies himself further as the person “whose assurance lay in the Messiah of the God of Jacob, who was attractive because of the psalms of Israel”. The reformer noted, “Here he exalts himself beyond all limits, but indeed speaking the truth, without any arrogance … this he did not inherit from his birth nor learn from his father, nor attain through his royal power or wisdom. This was given

20 WA 41:99, 11-14; LW 13:243-244.
him from above, without any merit of his own, and he rejoices in this, praising God and thanking him from the bottom of his heart”. For God had promised him that the Messiah would come from his line.22

David’s calling himself a person who was “attractive because of the psalms of Israel” revealed for Luther that he could serve as a model for the Christians of his own day in giving witness to the Messiah. “He did not keep this certain promise of the Messiah to himself, nor for himself. For faith does not sit still, does not take a holiday, but it ventures forth, speaks and proclaims the promise and the grace of God so that other people come to it and participate in it. Indeed, out of his great joy he moves forward: he fashions beautiful, sweet psalms, sings attractive and exuberant songs, so that he can praise and thank God with joy and at the same time attract people for their benefit and teach them”.23 Readers understood that they were to go and do likewise. For David called the psalms attractive and sweet not only because their use of language and music made them artistic successes but because of their theology. It conveyed the consolation found in God’s promise of the Messiah. “They bring comfort to all troubled, miserable consciences, which in their sins are caught in anxiety, terror in the face of death, fear, and every kind of distress and wretchedness”.24

Luther’s fundamental concern for the consolation of stricken consciences informed his exegesis throughout his career. Luther affirmed that David had spoken by the Holy Spirit and that his words in the psalms were channels through which God spoke to his people.25 Then he left the person of David to concentrate on the confession of faith in the coming together of Christ’s divine and human natures in the one person of the Messiah, who as God-man delivered his people from their sins.

24 WA 54:30-39; LW 15:273-274.
25 WA 54:34, 30-38, 15; LW 15:275-278.
David, a Classic Example of Repentance

David’s eating of the consecrated bread reserved for the priests alone (1 Samuel 21:6) served Luther as an illustration that “necessity and love may lift the restrictions of the law”, as he said in a sermon from his Church Postil of 1526 on Luke 14:1-11. But most often David embodied the believer who commits grievous sin and is brought to repentance by the Word of the Lord. David’s fall into the sins of adultery and murder, and his subsequent repentance when Nathan rebuked him (2 Samuel 11-12), provided Luther with a prime example of his own theology of repentance. David’s sin also illustrated, for the Wittenberg reformer, the tyrannous power of sin. He used that point to remind his hearers and readers of the necessity of clinging to Christ and depending on the power of the Holy Spirit. Preaching on Matthew 24:15-28, in 1537, Luther reminded his hearers that David was a great man, but when God removed his support, he fell into sin. That demonstrated the power of Satan.26

Luther regarded Psalm 51 as David’s direct reaction to his fall into sin. The reformer could comment on this psalm with hardly a mention of David’s adultery and subsequent repentance under the admonition of Nathan.27 In a sermon of 1522 he noted that in Psalm 51 David was saying as much as “Look, I am only flesh and blood, made in this way, which is in and of itself sin and I cannot do anything else but sin. For even if you manage your hands and feet or your tongue, so they do not sin, the tendency and desire remain because blood and flesh is so even if you to go Rome or Saint James”.28 He could also use Da-

26 WA 45:262, 19-23.
27 In his treatment of Psalm 51 in 1517, revised in 1525, before his theology focused on the action of law and gospel in producing daily repentance had fully matured, Luther only mentioned his presumption of the association of David’s own sin and repentance with the psalm, WA 18:505, 20-23, LW 14:173. His initial lectures on the psalms, 1513-1515, contains a similar mention of David’s sin and repentance in connection with this psalm, without any development of the story from 2 Samuel, WA 3:291, 24-28, LW 10:240.
28 WA 10, 1, 2:235, 3-14, Sermons of Martin Luther, 2:370.
David’s sin as a reminder of the inevitability of sin, in the lives of all and especially in the lives of those whom God places in positions of political power. As he commented on Psalm 45:6, “the scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness”, Luther observed that “David was a holy king, and he ruled by divine aid and favor. Peter declares in Acts (2:25) that he administered his kingdom according to God’s will and in (1) Kings (14:8) God says, ‘I have found the man who will carry out my every wish’. Yet he was responsible for many injustices, like the case of the miserable orphan Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 16, 19) and the case of Uriah, whom he ordered killed so that he might have his wife (2 Samuel 11:15) … It is impossible for people in power not to sin; neither are they able to administer justice to everyone. The reason is that the magnitude of affairs and Satan’s artfulness exceed their strength. It is enough, however, if they do not sin willfully and intentionally, but have the will to administer their office faithfully. What takes place accidentally other than they intend is wiped out as though by a sponge and absorbed by the remission of sins”.29

In his lectures on Psalm 51 in 1532, edited for publication in 1538, Luther made fuller use of the story of David’s adultery, his arranging of Uriah’s death, and his subsequent repentance under Nathan’s rebuke. The story gave concrete meaning to the psalm for his hearers and readers. As he began his exposition Luther expressed his surprise that the scholastic exegetes had concentrated their attention in interpreting the text on David’s actual sins of adultery and murder. He pointed out that the text presented the king’s acknowledgment of his “external sins but also of his entire sinful nature, the source and origin” of those sins. “The entire psalm speaks of his entire sinfulness or the root of his sin, not only about what he did, but also the fruit born of the tree of sin and its root”. The Wittenberg reformer often replaced the Medieval Latin term “original sin” not only with the typical German translation “inherited sin” but also

with “root sin”. In addition, Luther noted that David not only stood guilty of adultery and Uriah’s murder but also of wanting to appear in public as a holy man who lived the law and justice while at the same time he had arranged for the killing of Uriah, “a good man without doubt, of outstanding trustworthiness in David’s kingdom”. In breaking the fifth and sixth commandments, David had defied and despised the Lord, and thus he had become guilty of blasphemy, against the first commandment. This made David an excellent example of the interconnectedness of sins and their root in rejecting God and doubting his Word. Luther also emphasized the importance of the call to repentance. “If Nathan had not come, David would soon have sinned against the Holy Spirit”. Luther applied David’s experience with Uriah, Bathsheba, and Nathan to the lives of his hearers and readers directly. “It is our sin since we are born and conceived in sin. David speaks here of his own experience. Therefore, by definition, ‘sin’ signifies the corruption of all our powers, interior and exterior … this psalm is a general teaching regarding all the people of God, from the beginning until this day, by which David, or rather the Holy Spirit in David, teaches us to recognize both God and ourselves”.31

David recognized both his guilt in the case of Uriah and Bathsheba and, “in the mirror” of these sins, “the impurity of his entire nature, as he thought to himself, ‘Look at me, I, who have governed the state and supported the church and the worship of God, I, who “have guided them with the skill of my hands” Psalm 77 (Ps. 78:72), how could I have fallen into this hideous situation, into so many and such terrible sins?’” For from one sin comes the recognition of all sin, as if he would have said, “if I, the kind of man I am, have fallen as if from heaven into hell, what a huge attestation this fall is to myself and others that nothing good exists in my flesh?” Luther commented, “great is the wisdom that recognizes that we are noth-

30 WA 40, 2:318, 26-321, 16.
31 WA 40, 2:325, 32-34, 326, 29-33.
ing else but sin, so that we do not deal lightly with sin, as the teachers of the pope do, who define sin as that which is said, done, or thought contrary to God’s law. According to this psalm you must define sin in its totality, which is present when we are born from father and mother, before we reach the age where we are able to say, do, or thinking something. Out of this root nothing good in God’s sight can arise from within us. This is the origin of the distinction of two kinds of sin. First of all, the whole nature is corrupt through sin and subject to eternal death. Then other kinds of sin exist, which a person who has the law can recognize, such as, for example, stealing, adultery, murder, etc”. Throughout the rest of this commentary Luther places the words of the psalm into David’s situation as he repented of his adultery and murder, particularly as he treated the “have mercy on me” of verse 3.

In addressing David’s confession, verse 8, “let the bones you have broken rejoice”, Luther returned to the scene in which Nathan rebuked David, and he placed David’s repentance there into the context of these words. He noted the necessity of God’s promise coming to the contrite heart, which believes that God is the father of mercy and all consolation (2 Corinthians 1:3). “The reliable means of purging, the most effective medicine that is necessary to cleanse the bones and conscience of the sinner came to David, as it came to Paul and Peter”, when God brought them to repentance as evil sinners so that they might receive the mercy of God. Luther noted in commenting on verse 7 that in 2 Samuel 12, the purging that the king experienced with Nathan’s call to repentance led to great joy as he heard the words, “you shall not die”. David needed to be reduced to his own “purgatory”, weighed down by the sorrow over his own sin and God’s wrath, to be able to cling to God’s

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34 WA 40, 2:415, 24-417, 17.
faithfulness in showing mercy. As he wrote the psalm, David knew that from his own experience he should bring other transgressors to repentance (verse 13).

**David, a Model for Christian Rulers**
Luther believed that God has called every human being to take care of the needs of others in the contexts of their home and family life, their economic activities, their place in society, and in the church. He used the stories of biblical figures to offer instruction to hearers and readers, and he did not hesitate to provide guidelines even for temporal rulers on the basis of Scripture. David served as a prime example for him of how those called to exercise temporal authority should actually carry out this assignment from God.

In 1526 Luther had preached on Psalm 112 in the presence of Ernst and Franz, dukes of Lüneburg, who were visiting Wittenberg at the time. This sermon reveals how Luther’s presumption that David authored the psalm guided his reading of its comfort for the persecuted faithful of God in the face of the might and repression of tyrants. He did not associate words in the psalm often with David’s own manner of governing, but on occasion he did. In this case Luther’s preface criticized three vices of the rich and powerful: their striving for earthly might, fame, and pleasure. Regarding the second, he commented that “we shall never reach the point at which by our own efforts we will hang onto honors. God cannot tolerate that; he will blow them over ... David and the other patriarchs and prophets

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37 Jaroslav Pelikan suggested that the printed version of the psalm contains contradictions due to editors rather than to Luther himself because he labels the psalm a psalm of comfort and consolation at its beginning but later turns to condemnation of the abuses of wealth and power, LW 13:xi. Pelikan’s suggestion is probably false because it misses a fundamental principle in Luther’s preaching, which captured a significant element in the world view of the psalms: that the consolation of the faithful rests in part on calling them as well as their foes to repentance.
sought no honor in this manner.”. In commenting on verse 2, “His descendents will be powerful on earth. The family of the upright will be blessed”, Luther observed that David knew that the experience of the Jewish nation had confirmed that blessings continue to accompany the faithful. The Jews did “not seek wealth and fame apart from God’s will”. They let God give them honor, and therefore they received his blessing, as David reflected in the text. Luther cited David’s reflection in Psalm 37:25, “I was once young and have gotten old and have never seen a righteous person abandoned or his children begging for bread”. David’s confidence in God’s providence informed Luther’s own faith.

God exalted David from the status of a commoner to being king, Luther pointed out, in an affirmation of God’s control of human history and even the lives of those who exercise earthly power. However, despite David’s avowal that “wealth and riches remain in the house of the upright” (verse 3), David was “driven out of his kingdom by his own son, and other saints have lived in great poverty”. Luther met the challenge: David and others who suffer among the people of God “have their treasury, their cashboxes, their storage cellars with God, in a place where no thief can steal them (Matthew 6:20). They know that they have all they need in God (2 Corinthians 3:5). Although they do not have so much that their money bags bulge and their cashboxes are full, they are certain that God will feed them although they suffer want for a while, and God is testing them, God will indeed not remain far away. They will have something to eat, even if heaven has to rain down bread”. For Luther David’s life and faith confirmed what the king had written in this text: that God rules the world in the interests of his own chosen people.

41 WA 19:310, 19; LW 13:400.
42 WA 19:310, 31-311, 14; LW 13:400.
While at the Coburg castle in 1530, Luther wrote a commentary on Psalm 118. Among his comments on the phrase first expressed in verse 1, “the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever,” he discussed human dependence on God. “Scripture states that God made both, lords and subjects, and temporal government belongs to him”, as David had said in Psalm 18:48 and 144:2. “Here he does not boast of himself, that he wanted to rule his own people with power and wisdom, although he had the most wonderful laws and customs, established by God himself through Moses and the prophets who had anointed and confirmed him as king by God’s command. He had learned by experience what the power and wisdom of kings and princes can do if God himself does not manage the household”. The rebellions of Absalom and Bichri (2 Samuel 15-18, 20) proved to David that God was in ultimate control.43

Twice Luther used the exposition of psalm texts as the occasion for creating what could be viewed as a “mirror of the prince”, an admonition to rulers to rule faithfully as servants of God and their people. In 1530 he did so with a commentary on Psalm 82, and in 1534 he turned to Psalm 101, which he read as David’s own description of himself as king. Luther wrote this commentary, quite likely, as an admonition to his own ruler, Johann Friedrich the Elder, to live more piously.44 Luther described the psalm as David’s presentation of “the authentic image of the true ruler”.45 Luther worried particularly about the

43 WA 31, 1:81, 8-82, 22; LW 14:53-54.
45 WA 51, 227, 37-38. This description stems from Heinrich Bornkamm, Luther and the Old Testament, trans. Eric W. and Rutch C. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 9. See also Wolfgang Sommer, Gottesfurcht und Fürstenherrschaft: Studien zum Obrigkeitverständnis Johann Arndts und lutherischer Hofpre-
abuse of power by courtiers, in general and at the Saxon court in particular—his disclaimer that he had no experience at court and knew little of the trickery and deception that was practiced there was a pious, rhetorical exaggeration.\textsuperscript{46} In this psalm, Luther explained, “David, who was a king and had to keep servants at his court, cites himself as an example of the way a pious king or prince should treat his personnel”. That message was aimed at his own prince. In the service of his message the commentator also carefully framed his picture of David. Governing officials should particularly “praise and thank God if they have a good organization and upright servants at home or at court. That should teach them to know that it is a special gift of God and not due to their own wisdom or capabilities”.\textsuperscript{47} Though he had forthrightly discussed David’s sin when treating him as a model of repentance, in this commentary he ignored all the vices and transgressions of the king. “Dear David was so highly gifted and such a precious, special hero is not only innocent of all deception and taking of life that took place in his kingdom. Indeed, he also actually opposed such liars and murderers, did not want to tolerate them, and acted against them so that they had to yield”.\textsuperscript{48}

In Psalm 101 Luther found the virtues of the ruler and his responsibilities effectively depicted. He employed his own distinction of the two realms of human life to summarize David’s way of ruling. “We hear in this psalm of many fine, princely virtues that David practiced. In this psalm he does not treat how to serve God, as in the first commandment, but how people should behave properly toward their neighbors. For just as the spiritual realm or responsibility shows how people should act properly in relationship to God, so the earthly realm shows how people live in relationship to each other and how


\textsuperscript{46} \textit{WA} 51:201, 22-26; \textit{LW} 13:147.

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{WA} 51:201, 30-34; \textit{LW} 13:147.

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{WA} 51:234, 12-16, 235, 10-16; \textit{LW} 13:188-189.
they do it in such a way that body, possessions, wife, child, home, land, and material goods remain in peace and security and how they can fare well on this earth”.\textsuperscript{49}

The psalm reflects David’s practice of his powers as ruler, Luther contended. In its first verse the king praised “mercy and justice”. These terms are used here in the sense of the horizontal realm of human life. In this instance they do not relate to God’s mercy and justice but to that exercised by earthly rulers. He explained that justice is almost always a synonym for punishment in courtly circles. “If there is only mercy and the prince lets everyone milk him and kick him in the mouth and does not punish or express his rage—against wrongdoing—then not only the court but the land itself will be filled with wicked rascals. All discipline and honorable actions will disappear. However, if there is only or too much rage and punishing, tyranny will emerge, and then the upright will not be able to catch their breath because of the constant fear and worry. Even the heathen say this; it is an everyday experience: ‘strict justice is the greatest injustice’. But the opposite is said of mercy, ‘pure mercy is the most unmerciful thing possible’”.\textsuperscript{50}

Luther read his convictions concerning good government into David’s placing mercy before justice in this passage: “Moderation is good in all things. To achieve it is an art that must be attributed to God’s mercy. To get as close to this goal as possible, it is better to give too much mercy than too much justice. That is why David mentions mercy first and then justice. Where this middle way cannot be achieved, it is better to practice mercy than punishment. For in giving mercy a person can draw back and give less, but when punishment is given, it cannot be taken back, particularly where it affects body, life, or limb”.\textsuperscript{51} David himself, Luther recalled, had practiced this principle with wisdom. The king did not punish his cousin and field

\textsuperscript{49} WA 51, 241, 31-42; LW 13:197.
\textsuperscript{50} WA 51:205, 24-206, 3; LW 13:152-153.
\textsuperscript{51} WA 51:206, 7-15; LW 13:152-153.
commander Joab, although Joab had twice committed homicide (2 Samuel 3:27; 20:10). David cursed Joab because he murdered Abner and Amasa, two rival field commanders more upright than he. But the king would have provoked severe dissension within his infant kingdom had he proceeded against Joab, and so he waited and placed the punishment of this wicked servant in the hands of his son Solomon (1 Kings 2:6).52

Luther praised King David’s reliance on God alone. “When David wanted to take the life of Goliath, they wanted to give him instructions, put armor on him, and gave him real equipment. Yes, sir! David could not wear the armor and had another instructor in mind, and he struck Goliath before anyone else knew what he was supposed to do. He was not an apprentice who had been trained in this craft. He was a master who had been trained in the craft by God”.53

David demonstrated how to rule a kingdom in both dimensions of human life. Verses 2-4 speak of his care and honesty in keeping the kingdom close to God’s Word. He had restored divine worship and the ark to its proper place (1 Chronicles 13:3). He obeyed God’s command to refrain from building the temple himself (2 Samuel 7:2, 13). In Psalms 60:6 and 108:7 he expressed his delight in the fact that “God speaks in his sanctuary”, which Luther interpreted as the king’s saying, “In my kingdom I have the true and pure Word of God and irreproachable and forthright teaching. I neither institute nor maintain any idolatry, factions, divisions, or any kind of false teachers”,54 an obvious application of the verse to the reformers own time and program for public life in Saxony. Following David’s example required God’s guidance and support, Luther concluded. Among Israel’s kings only three at most were highly praised, and “David is the only example which is presented as a model for them all, for the others ruled with idols and false

53 WA 51:208, 35-40; LW 13:158.
prophets, and they persecuted, murdered, the true prophets and condemned God’s Word”.\textsuperscript{55} God had performed a miracle in giving David the capability of exercising his responsibility beyond even his great intelligence and ability.\textsuperscript{56}

Luther’s eschatological thinking exhibited itself continuously in his works as he noted how evil rages against God’s faithful people, how Satan’s deceptions always are attacking God’s truth. He therefore was not surprised that “in David’s story one can notice that many people were secretly extremely hostile toward him. When they had opportunity, they did their very best to strike out against him, to go after him, to cause him trouble, and to afflict him with every possible kind of suffering. In spite of this he continued to sing his song and ventured everything with God and his Word”.\textsuperscript{57}

David’s relationship with his own courtiers provided example enough of how cautious rulers must be in the choice and use of their advisors. Ahitophel served as David’s closest and best adviser but finally tried to undermine and overthrow David’s rule. “The young nobles and courtiers want to be free. They want to be lords in the lands themselves … When they are constrained to do something that they do not want to do, they know how to dissimulate and lie in wait until they see their opportunity. For a time they can hide their shifty eyes and deceiving faces very well”. God can even call a David to repentance by letting Ahitophel deceive him, as if he were the voice of God (2 Samuel 16:23). “Thus it is very difficult at court to recognize and control the formidable masks of the devil.”\textsuperscript{58}

David’s assertion that he undertook no wickedness but hated lawbreakers (verse 3) led Luther into another comment on courtiers. David could have easily hated some peasants in the countryside. “But to hate the lords at Jerusalem and in his court of

\textsuperscript{55} WA 51:217, 14-18; LW 13:167.
\textsuperscript{56} WA 51:221, 32-36; LW 13:173.
\textsuperscript{57} WA 51:218, 20-24; LW 13:169.
\textsuperscript{58} WA 51:219, 11-38; LW 13:170-171.
Zion, that was indeed an accomplishment, even for David himself. But he was something more than the David of Bethlehem. He is a hero and an extraordinary man. He cuts though it all and lets God rule and be his Lord. Even if he lost a hundred Ahitophels, he would still prefer to keep his Lord and God, who is called almighty and can create and bestow many, many kingdoms”.\textsuperscript{59} Luther may have been hoping that his Saxon readers would take his admonition seriously.

Luther regarded it as truly miraculous that a ruler can recognize the necessity of hating transgressors, spiritual rogues, the saints of Satan, and to “separate them from himself in such a way that they do not stick to him or cling to him or remain in his presence at all”. Luther imagined that those surrounding David “sang very sweetly to him, praising one person here, one person there, extolling our cousin here or our brother-in-law there, in the hope of getting them a place in court or a promotion in the administration, regardless of their uprightness … They succeed, too, unless God gives rulers a spirit like that of David so that they follow his example in constantly knowing how to avoid these false servants of God”.\textsuperscript{60}

David exercised self-discipline and throughout the psalms repeatedly admonished others to guard themselves against temptation.\textsuperscript{61} The king not only exhibited virtues and a freedom from vices in his own person. He publicly waged war against deception and murder and especially false teaching. “David was highly gifted and a precious, special hero”. “He sought, demanded, called, ordained and commanded everywhere that the Word of God be preached in its truth and purity and that God be properly worshiped” (1 Chronicles 15). He himself provided leadership for proper worship in composing psalms. He presented himself to all rulers as an example and perfect model

\textsuperscript{59} WA 51:227, 33-42; LW 13:181.
\textsuperscript{60} WA 51:230, 22-36; LW 13:184.
of the way a person should seek God’s rule and righteousness (Matthew 6:33).62

Luther was conscious of the fact that his distinction between the two realms—the vertical, in which the gospel proclaims and enacts God’s gift of forgiveness and new life, and the horizontal, in which the law prescribes the life of love toward God’s creatures—was governing his interpretation of this psalm, and so he recognized that his critics would say that his treatment of this text violated his own hermeneutic. He imagined that they would say, “David is doing the very thing in this psalm that your interpretation talks about: he mixes the spheres of spiritual and secular authority and wants to exercise both”. Luther rejected the criticism, and indeed, from two perspectives. “If a preacher in his official capacity says to kings and princes and to all the world, ‘Give thanks to God and fear him, and keep his commandments,’ he is not meddling in the affairs of secular government. On the contrary, he is thereby serving and being obedient to the highest ruler. Thus, the entire spiritual government really does nothing else than serve divine authority. That is why they are called servants of God and ministers of Christ in Scripture”. Likewise, “if David or a prince teaches or commands fear of God and hearing his Word, he is not acting as a lord of that Word but as an obedient servant. He is not meddling in spiritual or divine rule but remains a humble subordinate and faithful servant”.63

Luther’s distinction of two realms remained distinct from the institutions that bore responsibility for each in a general sense. His functional understanding of how God works in this world determined how all three of his distinctions—between law and gospel, between passive and active righteousness, and between the vertical and horizontal realms—were used.

David modeled “fine, princely virtues” in the horizontal realm of human life, keeping the people within the law, “each

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person in relation to his neighbor ... the secular government should direct the people horizontally toward one another, seeing to it that body, property, honor, wife, child, house, home, and all manner of goods remain in peace and security and are blessed on earth”. In providing an example of this, “David (is) the best of all”. Nonetheless, Luther recognized that in the horizontal realm of life even those who do not trust God can be blessed by him with secular wisdom and insight into good governmental practices. He urged reading of good pagan authors who wrote on effective administration of society, and he said that rulers such as Augustus and Alexander provided their people with good government. But David recognized that God alone gives the power to rule well. Whereas the pagan rulers ascribe their success in ruling to “fortune” or “luck”, David and other God-fearing rulers have ruled under God’s guidance to serve God and the people he entrusts to them.

Luther found David’s principles for ruling in the latter half of the psalm. “I destroy him who secretly maligns his neighbor”, the psalmist had written. Luther believed that David must have been speaking of courtiers, who, he was certain, generally malign others in their jockeying for power. This was the reformer’s way of reading the biblical text into his own situation, applying to the pressing need he was addressing. He commended David for destroying “royal, princely slanderers who sit in government offices, not only at court but also in the country. That is what I call the virtue of a David and an example of princely courage, a special impulse from God”.

David further rejected those of “proud demeanor and conceited in spirit”. “David is here speaking of the pride of governmental officials in relation to their subjects. He not only prides himself on the fact that he himself has not been proud in

66 WA 51:244, 18-244, 33; LW 13:200-201.
relationship to his subjects—which is itself truly a high, royal virtue—but that he has also not permitted it among those who served at his court”. David provided a sterling example of the godly humility that too seldom graces the lives of ruling officials, as readers of Luther’s commentary were urged to observe by reading his story in the books of Samuel.\textsuperscript{68} Luther drew the contrast between David and Saul, the former who remained humble, the latter who became proud and defied God, as an admonition to his hearers in preaching in Wittenberg in 1532.\textsuperscript{69} The next verse expressed delight in the faithful and in devout servants, and Luther ventured, “Maybe David succeeded, as he boasts here, because he surveyed the entire land, opening his eyes, looking around for faithful, devout people wherever he was able to find them, and selecting without any discrimination among persons”. Just as God had chosen the shepherd boy David, so David managed his kingdom.\textsuperscript{70}

David closed the psalm with a vow to destroy the godless in the land. “Just as women are reluctant to hear someone call them whores when that is just what they are, so kings and lords are reluctant, and courtiers are even more reluctant, to hear someone rebuke them and punish them as unrighteous and wicked, because that strikes too close to home. David goes right ahead and minces no words. He does it rudely and indiscreetly enough. He wants to suppress nothing. In fact, he boasts of it as a good deed that he rebukes his own people at court so shamefully and even destroys them”. That, Luther reminded his readers, had happened in relationship to Ahithophel (2 Samuel 17:23), Joab (1 Kings 2:28-34), and others of his officials. “David must have been not only a brave hero with his fist but also an independent fellow with his tongue. It certainly was the same David who tore up the bear and slew the lion (1 Samuel 17:34),

\textsuperscript{68} WA 51:252, 3-14, 253, 20-39; LW 13:209-210, 211-212.
\textsuperscript{69} WA 36:332, 29-333, 14.
\textsuperscript{70} WA 51:255, 24-256, 5; LW 13:214.
and smote Goliath (1 Samuel 17:50)”. Nonetheless, David had to suffer the punishment of God for his own sin, in the defilement of his daughter Thamar by her brother Amnon (2 Samuel 13:1-21), the slaying of Amnon by his brother Absalom (2 Samuel 13:28-33), who in turn drove David into exile (2 Samuel 15:13-37), ravished his wife—in fact, his concubines (2 Samuel 16:22)—and then died of a spear through his heart (2 Samuel 18:1-18). Joab, Ahithophel, and all Israel rebelled against him. Nonetheless, David did repent, and God remained faithful to him. David’s rule took its course, and God forgave and blest him.  

For Luther David’s trust in God and God’s faithfulness to him formed the heart of any story of a successful political ruler. David’s story contained many lessons regarding the pitfalls as well as the blessings of the calling of rulers from God, and Luther focused above all on the virtues that David exhibited in giving his readers a picture of the proper way to govern when God entrusts that task to an individual. In so doing the reformer turned his idealized picture of David as king into a pointed critique of Saxon court life, the problem with which he was dealing in his own environment.  

David, an Instructor in How to Read the Bible  
David also served Luther as a model for immersing himself in the Word of God. In composing the preface for the Wittenberg edition of his works in 1539, he turned to the monastic pattern of “reading, praying, meditating” (lectio, oratio, meditatio) but revised it to reflect his own experience with Scripture. To preserve the three-fold form of the model, he presumed the reading of the text, and to prayer and meditation he added the spiritual struggles that had accompanied his own life of repentance, with the word tentatio—in German Anfechtung. He informed his readers, “this is the way taught by holy King David—and doub-
tlessly used also by all the patriarchs and prophets—in Psalm 119. There you will find three rules presented in detail throughout the entire psalm”. Luther continued, “First, you should know that the Holy Scripture is the kind of book which turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness because only it teaches about eternal life”. Readers could then see “how David continues to pray in this psalm, ‘teach me, Lord, instruct me, lead me, show me,’ and many more words like these”. “Of course, he knew well and daily heard and read the text of Moses and other books, he nonetheless wants to lay hold of the real teacher of Scripture himself, so that he may not pounce upon it with his reason and become his own teacher”. David recognized that reading Scripture is not like reading about the legend of Markolf, a popular German folk tale, or Aesop’s Fables, which Luther held in high regard as a source of worldly wisdom.73 David knew that in contrast to such works reading Scripture required the Holy Spirit and prayer, Luther insisted.74

David not only prayed over the text of his Bible reading; he meditated on Scripture. Luther commented, “You see in the same psalm how David constantly boasts that he wants to do nothing but speak, write, utter, repeat, sing, hear, and read God’s Word and commandments day and night, at all times. For God does not intend to bestow his Spirit upon you apart from his external Word. Conform yourself to that. He has not given a vacuous command when he commands you to write, preach, read, hear, sing, speak orally and in writing”.75 Luther’s trust depended on this “external” Word, and he steadfastly opposed all spiritualists, such as Thomas Müntzer, who believed that they had received an “internal” revelation that could not and dare not be tested against the written Word of God. Luther’s Ockhamist training had led him to believe that God works through the material order he had created and called good in

73 WA 50:440–460.
75 WA 50:659, 30–35; LW 34:286.
Genesis 1. He believed that God’s power to establishing a saving relationship with his chosen people lies in the externally proclaimed gospel (Romans 1:17).

Luther’s own experience led him to see that encountering God’s Word in Scripture always takes place for believers in the midst of spiritual struggles. He called them the “touchstone” of understanding and experiencing “how correct, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how powerful, how comforting God’s Word is”. For David “laments so often regarding all kinds of foes, arrogant princes or tyrants, false spirits and factions, whom he must endure because he meditates, that is, continually is occupied with God’s Word, as has been mentioned, in all sorts of ways”. Luther applied David’s experience to his own day. “As soon as God’s Word dawns throughout your life, the devil will visit you and make you a real expert (on Scripture)”. That Luther had experienced in his own conflicts with the papacy, he observed. He concluded his treatment of “David’s rules” by saying that “if you study hard in accord with his example, then you will also sing and boast with him in the psalm ‘to me the law from your mouth is preferable to thousands of gold and silver pieces’” (Psalm 119:72).76

Luther’s assessment of people of God in Scripture was usually forthright and open. He felt no need to mask or conceal their sins since he believed that the whole life of God’s faithful people is to be a life of repentance, due to the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of his chosen children. So in David the Wittenberg reformer was able to find a model for the believers of his own time, in the king’s study of Scripture, his praise of God, and his faithfulness in carrying out his calling as ruler. David also served as a means of proclaiming Christ, as God and human creature, as Lord and Savior. Above all, he served as a model for the life of repentance that confirmed both the power of sin and the greater power of God’s Word. David served for Luther as a concrete example of God’s...

76 WA 50:660, 1-19; LW 34:286-287.
faithfulness and of his faithful people’s struggles and service in this world.

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