

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

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## Enter The Hero

We can hardly imagine what a prophet was in ancient Israel; indeed, even scholars are only beginning to unearth what they did, how they lived and functioned. They are rather various: Elijah, for instance, was a figure of such towering personal grandeur that it seems almost vulgar to ask who fed him, or how he was received by people; the Kings of Samaria found him appearing at their elbow when they least expected it, fearlessly denouncing them, predicting their downfall or death. When he is mentioned there is a faint scent of smouldering, often an explosion of divine fire. Isaiah lived in the court of Jerusalem, apparently a respected counsellor of the King, paid presumably out of the civil list; yet there's firm tradition that for two years he refused to dress himself, in order to symbolize the nakedness of godless politics in the royal court: and we hear that his life ended with his being *sawn in half*, a fate no longer accorded to civil servants in our own day.

### I'm Going Back To King David's Time

David was such a hero to the Israelite mind: the handsome child, destined to be King ever since Samuel unexpectedly poured oil over his head as he stood among his brothers, the giant-killer, the brave shepherd, the persecuted courtier of the doomed King Saul, the faithful friend of Jonathan, the brilliant general, the victor over the Philistines, the winner of Jerusalem from the Jebusites, the musician, dancer, and psalmist, the beloved King who was first invited to call God his Father. At the same time the record shows this most rounded figure as capable of being forced into murder to protect his reputation (it didn't work, and David's repentance was instant and sincere) and also as a man whose closest relatives could rebel against him, so that we find him prefiguring Jesus as he leaves Jerusalem by night, and ascends the Mount of Olives in tears, being stoned by an abusive passer-by. For all that, *David never lost his closeness to God*; in this he opens a new chapter in the Bible: no previous figure shows us so clearly that *God can be close to a sinner*; the chroniclers love David, and, as we read the story, so do we; it is impossible to miss the sense that *so does God*. It is this mutual fidelity that makes David so real a hero; his guilty collapse at the reproach of Nathan the prophet is so genuine; it is clear that his faith in God made him vulnerable to the claims of justice, and that made him a good

and great King, who lived in his people's memory.

### A Shoot From The Stem Of Jesse

Isaiah kept the memory of David in hard times. He saw some of the most irreligious of the kings; and this served to gild the memory of David more and more brightly. It is a short step from this reverent memory to the hope that the days of David might return; and it was in this context that the unnamed figure was born in people's minds, of an anointed one, or *messiah*, who would spring from the royal line, once more embodying that heroic and holy humanity which is *loved by God*. When at last the throne of David was carried off to Babylon, and the royal family liquidated, the hopes of Israel seemed finally extinguished, the promises of God all shown to be fantasies. It fell to the prophets of the exile, those great and lonely figures, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, to see that the heir of David would have to come from above, to be a *divine* gift to the world that destroys its happiness: and thus the spiritual stage was set for the coming of the real Messiah. That Jesus comes, not riding the clouds of heaven, but born in the midst of a captive people and sharing their fallen house, was too much for most Jewish minds to comprehend: as Moses found in Egypt, *the Israelites would not listen to him, so crushed their spirit, so cruel their slavery*. Yet Matthew and Luke remind us, *he was born in Bethlehem, because Joseph was of David's house and line*.

Fr Philip