

**THE IDEAL OF
HUMANITY IN OLD
TIMES AND NEW**

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The Ideal of Humanity in Old Times and New by John Stuart Blackie

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I

DAVID, KING OF ISRAEL

I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, that is cunning in playing, and a mighty valiant man, and a man of war, and prudent in matters, and a comely person, and the Lord is with him.

1 SAMUEL, xvi. 18.



DAVID, KING OF ISRAEL



Of all the fair chances that can befall a young man at his first start in the race of life, the greatest unquestionably is to be brought into contact, and, if possible, to enter into familiar relations with a truly great man. For this is to know what manhood means, and a manly life, not by grave precept, or wise proverb, or ideal picture; but to see the ideal in complete equipment and compact reality before you, as undeniably and as efficiently as the sun that sheds light from the sky, or the mountain that showers waters into the glen. As when the poor primeval dweller in a cave of the wilderness is for the first time brought into the view of a pillared Greek temple or a massive Florentine palace, he leaps into a new conception of what a human dwelling means, and, stirred with an imitative ambition, proceeds forthwith to shape for himself a miniature of the temple or the palace in the shape of a dainty little cottage, so the young man who first comes into living contact with

a Caesar or an Alexander, a Shakespeare or a Bacon, passes at one step, as it were, from a dream of manhood to the fact of a great personal possibility, or at least of a noble human relationship. He may never hope to become a Caesar in war, or a Shakespeare in literature, but certainly he has become feelingly alive to the kinship which he may claim, and the aspirations which he may indulge. What is a great man? A man is great amongst men, just as Mont Blanc is great among Swiss, or Ben Nevis among Scottish mountains; a man rising above the normal level of his kind, with as marked an elevation as these heights above the common reach of heaven-kissing hills, and at the same time possessing all the qualities and virtues that belong to terrestrial elevations generally. This is a qualification that must be distinctly marked. Mere height will not make a Ben Nevis or a Mont Blanc, and so a mere superiority in any of the special qualities or positions that belong to a man will not make a truly great man. The great man must be a complete man, a man all round, but at the same time a man in his peculiar sphere of the social harmony, presenting to the general eye a superiority as marked as any high Highland Ben does above its lowly congeners. A great genius is not necessarily a great man: he may be a Beethoven in the lordship of sweet sounds, a Raphael in the cunning handling of brush and pencil, a Napoleon in the well-ordered sweep of ambitious war: but not therefore a great man.

Jove is not Jove merely as a strong launcher of the thunderbolt, but as the assertor of justice, the avenger of perjury, and the protector of innocence. Nay, so far is mere special greatness of any description from giving a man claim to the praise of a truly great man, that, as we daily see, there is a strong tendency in the cultivation of any prominent specialty to defraud the other capacities that belong to a well-accounted human creature, and to disturb the balance of his manhood. Thus it happens that the strong point in a man's professional exercise becomes a weakness in his human character; his favourite virtue, like a pampered child, becomes his prominent weakness; the exaggerated presentment of one feature destroys the fair proportions, in which the beauty of an æsthetical whole consists; and in this way your mere lawyer, for instance, becomes an expert intellectual fencer, your mere poet a blower of splendid soap-bubbles or a colourist of clouds, and your mere parson a bundle of sacerdotal conceit. Let us say, therefore, that a great man is a man who, while in the exercise of his special capacity soaring as high above common men as an eagle above a barn-door fowl, is deficient in no function that makes a man a man. He is in all things essentially and broadly human, and achieves in the exercise of his one special talent the highest excellence, as Shakespeare did in the drama, only by the social atmosphere which he breathes, and the human sympathies which he cultivates.

Next to the actual contact and familiar companionship of such thoroughly-equipped specimens of our common humanity, the most important thing that a young man can do to furnish himself in like manner for his allotted part in the drama of human life, is to make himself minutely and, so to speak, personally acquainted with some of the great men who have headed the movements of the age to which they belonged and stamped their names on its history ; names in fact without which all history would be a body without a soul, or a drama without the central figure—the play of Hamlet without the part of Hamlet, if such a thing might be. Such names are Luther and Knox in the history of the Church, and in the political world Nelson and Bismarck. In the Greek and Roman world, of course, there are not a few names, such as Socrates and Plato, Cicero and Caesar, that dominate the epochs to which they belong, as the monumental pillar does the battle-field, or the cathedral the Episcopal province. The Hebrews in like manner, by the superior force of their moral inspiration, have gained for themselves the foremost place in the heroic heraldry of those to whom the world owes its most notable amount of propulsive advance ; and among these no doubt the Apostle Paul, at once by the expansiveness, the energy, and the wisdom of his evangelical aggression, will be universally accepted as the head. Happily also we know more of him, both from the general history of the first apostolical preaching

and from his epistles to the particular churches, than we know of any other of that adventurous brotherhood; but there is one man, the most prominent among the heroes of the Old Testament, whom we know more minutely and more familiarly than even St. Paul, and that is King David, whom I have therefore chosen to place before my fellow Scots as the pattern of a truly great man; and not only as an example but as a warning; for as nothing human is perfect, so a great man, like the son of Jesse, may at an unguarded moment, and under peculiar temptations, commit a great sin; a sin so great as might justly have caused his name to be erased from the roll of the truly great of all ages, had he not himself been forward to atone for this ignoble sin by the only act which can work such atonement, a noble repentance.

A single verse from the First Book of Samuel contains a pretty complete indication of the rare union of special gifts and wise conduct with great results which justify us in ranking this son of the Bethlehemite Jew as one of the greatest men that the history of the world can boast.

“Then answered one of the servants, and said, Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, that is cunning in playing, and a mighty valiant man, and a man of war, and prudent in matters, and a comely person, and the Lord is with him.”—1 SAM. xvi. 18.

The first point in this delineation is, that,