

8 Saul and David

The rest of Saul's story tells of his decline and tragic end:

Now the spirit of Yahweh had left Saul and an evil spirit from Yahweh filled him with terror. (I Sam. 16:14)

When Saul tried to make his own security, he ran counter to the spirit of God and his true strength at last deserted him. The control he sought to maintain, reaching out to be master of his own progress, was an illusion. Unreal and unsustainable, it cracked, crumbled and turned into weakness. As the truth forced itself upon him he resisted it furiously, but it kept on encroaching, sapping his self-confidence, and when he found his resistance was not able to stop it, he became both frantic and depressed. Foul moods crawling with terrors, overtook him as he began to suspect, but could not accept, that he had no control over his own destiny. Fears of what he knew not began to haunt him and pent up bitterness and fear forced its escape in irrational outbursts of anger.

When such moods began to plague Saul, his servants acquired a musician to entertain and soothe him, a young shepherd named David from the tribe of Judah. David's playing had the power to calm the king, to distract him and relax the tensions that were threatening to drive him mad, and it was not surprising that Saul grew very attached to him. He became Saul's armour bearer, his personal assistant in battle, where he showed his own courage as a fighter. But Saul needed him most for his charm and skill as a minstrel:

Whenever the spirit from God troubled Saul, David took the harp and played; then Saul grew calm and recovered, and the evil spirit left him. (I Sam 16:23)

But David was also a warrior. Saul's son Jonathan became his firm friend and admirer, while his success in battle brought him popularity in the army and made him something of a national hero. A slogan began to get around:

"Saul has killed his thousands,
and David his tens of thousands." (I Sam 18:7)

Such popularity and success turned Saul against him. When the very sight of David moved him to fits of jealousy, he dismissed him from his personal service by making him an officer in the army. But there his success was only greater and more frightening to the king, who, torn between affection for David, resentment of his success, and the compulsion of his popularity, began to think that the only way out was to kill him. Jonathan brought them together again and got David readmitted as Saul's personal assistant, but it was a mistake. Saul's fear and jealousy were only temporarily repressed, still at war with his affection and dependence, and making a battlefield of his emotions.

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War broke out again, and David went out to fight the Philistines; he inflicted a great defeat upon them and they fled before him. An evil spirit from Yahweh came on Saul as he was sitting in his house with his spear in his hand; David was playing the harp. Saul tried to pin David to the wall with his spear, but he avoided Saul's thrust and the spear stuck in the wall. David fled. (I Sam 19:8-10)

He went into hiding, but then his disappearance was treated by Saul as desertion and David was declared an outlaw. It must have been a cruel blow to the young man. He had served the king loyally, being only too successful. He had stood by Saul, coping with his irrational outbursts, until he was nearly murdered, and then, when he fled for his life, it was made to look as if he was the guilty party. From a high position among the leaders of Israel, from great popularity and high hopes for the future, he was suddenly become an outlaw, hunted and threatened, received with suspicion, in danger of death, hiding, slinking and deceiving as he fled for some kind of safety somewhere. The whole world had suddenly turned against him, and his resentment must have been deep and bitter.

He was a sensitive person, and well able to resent an injury, as history would show, so it would not be surprising if the rest of his story told of his determination to be revenged on Saul and to throw him from the high and mighty place to which he had ridden on the backs of successful warriors like David. The key to David's character and career is that it was not so. He left his revenge to Yahweh, trusting him to see justice done. David was something more than Samson.

With a small band of followers he escaped to the priests at Nob, who received him with suspicion, but, when he had convinced them he was on a secret mission for the king, gave him food and a sword.¹ Then, like many outlaws before and after him, he found a hideout in the desert caves of Judah. He gathered around him his close friends, his brothers and a motley band of oppressed or dissatisfied Israelites. With these he kept on the move, but always among his own tribe of Judah. Saul, meanwhile, had discovered his escape, and, refusing to believe the excuses of the priests at Nob, had them slaughtered for assisting him.²

Judah was disputed territory. As an Israelite tribe, they accepted Saul as their king; but they could be sympathetic to their own kinsman. In parts, they were subject to Philistine claims and frequent raids, and they were always in danger from the Amalekites. Among these people, David manoeuvred for support, but he was never safe: even when his men saved one city from a Philistine raid, he had to flee the town afterwards, before the inhabitants handed him over to Saul. Nor was that the last time he was betrayed by locals loyal to the king, and almost captured.³

One day, there came a chance for David to strike back. Saul was again in pursuit, with a force of Israelites greatly outnumbering David's gang. When he was all but cornered,

¹ I Sam 21:2-10 ² I Sam 22:1-23 ³ See I Sam 23.

David and a few men hid in the recesses of a cave, and by chance, Saul himself came alone into the cave to relieve himself. For once, Saul was defenceless, and David could have killed him; but he did not. He merely cut a piece from the hem of the cloak that Saul had laid aside, then kept himself and his men hidden till Saul had rejoined his troops.¹

Now David surely had many reasons for his restraint, not all of them moral or altruistic ones. He was a clever man, and it must have been obvious to him that by taking his personal revenge on Saul he would not improve his present position very much. If he escaped after killing the king, who knows how many waverers would then turn against him? Jonathan would succeed Saul, and would they still be friends when Jonathan was king and David the murderer of his father? And if David already had some glimmering of hope that kingship might eventually be his, if only over Judah, he was smart enough to know that the killing of an anointed king would not be a healthy precedent to have established.

On the other hand, his plight was so desperate that it could hardly be worse. All Israel seemed to side with Saul, and wherever he went, even in his own tribe of Judah, there were those who would take the news hot-foot to the king. Saul had cruelly abused his authority to outlaw, defame and persecute an innocent man, and David had here at least a chance of revenge.

The point of the story is that when it came to the crunch, David was prepared to leave revenge, and his own future, in the hands of Yahweh. If David had some glimpse or hope of his own great destiny, he resisted the temptation to reach out by violence and snatch that destiny for himself. (He did not fall as Shakespeare's Macbeth fell.) He knew he could not force or jog Yahweh's hand. The kingdom was not for seizing, but for Yahweh to give and take in his own time and way. David must wait for him to work in events, and his own revenge must remain in Yahweh's hands.

It does not matter that David was no Christian saint, but only a calm, clear-thinking realist: he was able, in his realism, to make the vital concession that Saul could not. Saul, to judge from his actions elsewhere, would have taken his revenge and then discovered what the consequences were, or what Yahweh thought of it; David, through patience, cunning or level-headed self-interest, was able to reach a modest and realistic appraisal of his position: that he was in the hands of Yahweh and must do his best to survive while waiting for Yahweh to give him his future. In the midst of rough passions, unchecked by civilisation or chivalry, it was the kind of basic personal trust Yahweh was looking for.

It appears again in the story of Nabal.² David had moved to Maon, where he "settled" in the sheep country. "Settling" meant living there with his followers and refraining from plundering the local flocks, in return for which he expected regular gifts. On a charitable

¹ I Sam 24:1-8 ² I Sam 25

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interpretation, he was keeping out other more rapacious nomads, and so was entitled to some recognition. On a less favourable view, he was running a protection racket.

One of the region's wealthy landowners was Nabal the Calebite, a brutish and ill-mannered man who gave David's people short shrift when they came to him with the customary "polite" request:

"Peace be to you. We haven't touched your shepherds all the time they were in our neighbourhood, so now that you're shearing and reaping your profits, how about a consideration for your servant David?"

Nabal knew of David, and whose servant he had been. His reply was a barbed insult: "Who is David? There are many servants nowadays who run away from their masters. Am I to take my produce and give it to men who come from I know not where?"

Perhaps he was a brave man, or perhaps he was a fool. Where there is no effective authority, a person should show some gratitude for peaceable neighbours. David, stung by the insult, ordered his men to arm for the slaughter of Nabal and his family. But Nabal's wife, Abigail, a more intelligent person than her husband, had been told about the demand and his reply. Unbeknown to him she had donkeys laden with provisions and intercepted David on the march, begging him to accept her gift and spare her husband's life, so that, leaving revenge to Yahweh, he himself would be blessed by Yahweh and would have nothing to regret later. Then

David said to Abigail "Blessed be Yahweh the God of Israel, who sent you to meet me today! Blessed be your wisdom and blessed you yourself for restraining me today from the crime of bloodshed and from avenging myself with my own hand."
(I Sam 25:32f)

When Nabal heard what had happened, he suffered a heart attack and died soon after, in which David saw the hand of Yahweh:

When David heard that Nabal was dead, he said "Blessed be Yahweh who has avenged the insult I received at Nabal's hand, and has restrained me from doing evil; Yahweh has brought Nabal's wickedness down on his own head."
(I Sam 25:39)

When it came to the point, David was willing to forgo the self-assertion which restores self-esteem and (important for a gang leader) wins the esteem of your followers. He was willing to trust Yahweh with his very self.

In David Yahweh had "found" a man very different from that great self-avenger, Samson. Samson had trusted Yahweh, but for him that only meant rushing ahead instinctively, emboldened and strengthened by Yahweh's spirit to take his own revenge. For David, it meant waiting, leaving such vital issues as revenge (though a man's prestige and survival

depended on it) in Yahweh's hands, for him to settle in his own time and way. Samson's boldness was so primitive that we could hardly call it "faith": it was trust without humility. David's faith, though still primitive, had reached the level of trust with humility: the right relationship between Yahweh's servant and himself. Because, in his self-assurance, Samson took revenge into his own hands, he could only be used blindly by Yahweh, until he destroyed himself with his enemies. David, who was wise enough to leave the fearful forces of personal revenge in Yahweh's hands, could become not just Yahweh's instrument, but his servant.

David knew his own limitations (as Samson did not) and in a successful warrior that was quite an achievement. He was capable of nursing vengeance - even to his death bed¹ - but in him the passion met with a deeper sense of Yahweh's own rights, and a conviction that, as much as the humblest follower or client of his depended on him for just judgement, he in his turn was not self-sufficient but depended on Yahweh to right his wrongs. From his earliest experience of independent power, as an outlaw leader, David was preparing to rule not as an absolute monarch, but as a dependent vassal, the servant of Yahweh.

As the man of caution who was wise enough (or cunning enough) to leave his enemies to Yahweh, he is the kind of leader Israel now needs. If she is to have a king, it cannot be a king whose own personal vindictiveness and blood-feuds only aggravate the rivalries that have already undone the work of Yahweh. David may have been wise enough to realise, on a political level, that it would not pay him in the long run to have built up a store of blood debts, but it was trust in Yahweh that cleared the way for such political wisdom. If David acted from enlightened self-interest, it was his confidence in Yahweh that enlightened it.

Saul eventually succeeded in driving David from Judah, and the outlaw went over to the Philistine king of Gath, who accepted him as a mercenary and put him in charge of the frontier town of Ziklag. He and his men were to keep the region clear of hostiles, which meant they were to attack the Judahites and their allies the Kenites. But David played a dangerous game of double cross. He directed his raids against the desert tribes further south, the Amalekites, and pretended that the booty he brought back was from Judah. So that no one could give his game away, he took no prisoners.

One incident from this period has its lesson for us.² David was away from Ziklag for some days, with his master and the other Philistine leaders, and when he returned, he found that the Amalekites had raided the town, burnt it and made off with many of the population as prisoners. The survivors were in a mood for stoning the warriors who had not been there when they needed them, but David set off in pursuit of the raiders. At the wadi Besor he had to leave behind a number of his men who were by now too exhausted (they had been on the march for days) to make the crossing and continue the pursuit.

¹ IK 2:8f ² I Sam 30

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At last he caught up with the raiders, who, thinking themselves safe in their own territory, had stopped too soon to divide the spoils and celebrate. David and his men slaughtered them and recovered not only their own people and possessions, but a great deal more as well, since the Amalekites had completed a sweep through the whole region. David's force returned rejoicing and enriched.

When they came to the men who had been left behind, he proposed to give them a share in the booty, but the others protested, since by rights it belonged to David and those who had fought for it - with the usual share, of course, for David's Philistine overlord.

But David saw it differently. As Yahweh had been generous to them, giving them not only the victory but far more in the way of booty than they had originally set out to recover, so they must be open-handed with the men who had stayed behind, too exhausted for anything more than guarding the baggage.

Nor did his liberality stop there. They had gone to recover their goods from a band of robbers, and, by Yahweh's provision, had stumbled on a major Amalekite camp, rich with plunder. David divided this loot with the main towns of Judah, sending to the elders of each a share proportional to the size of the town, with the message "Here is a present for you from the booty taken from the enemies of Yahweh."¹

It was a significant gesture. In theory, he was the servant of Achish, king of Gath, and had been fighting his enemies. But David chose to present himself as the servant of Yahweh, fighting his enemies and in his name distributing gifts to the elders of Judah. Achish, he knew, was far to the north with the other Philistine lords preparing for the final show-down with Saul, and whichever way the battle went, it was the right time for David to renew his contacts with the leaders of Judah and prepare the way, perhaps, for a return to them. By offering them his gifts, he was presenting himself as their benefactor, their provider and leader in Yahweh's name. He was asking them to accept his gifts and thereby enter into a relationship with him as their overlord.

It was, of course, an act of enlightened self-interest, as was his generosity to the weaker of his followers at Besor. He saw the wisdom of making friends for the future, as of retaining the loyalty of all his followers and not allowing resentment and jealousy to divide them into stronger and weaker groups. In both cases he showed that he was more than a greedy plunderer, that he could see beyond immediate gain to the long-term good: the solidarity of all his followers. His attitude showed him fit to rule Judah, and later all of Israel, but it was more than good politics. It was the expression of his faith in Yahweh, his confidence that Yahweh was the giver of his success and that in his actions he was imitating Yahweh's own generosity, the sovereignty of the god of warriors and outlaws,

¹ I Sam 30:26

who, out of his victories, provided magnificently for his followers and so encouraged their loyalty.

We shall come back to this point in Chapter Ten of this book. Meanwhile, let us return to Saul, and the end of his story.

In the last days of Saul, the several Philistine cities mustered for one great attack to put an end to the Israelite nuisance once and for all. Gath and Ashkelon, Gaza, Ashdod, Ekron, they were united for war, confident that, with David doing their work in Ziklag, the Israelites were safely divided, and soon to be conquered. The two armies met on Mount Gilboa, and the day ended disastrously for Israel. They were routed, and the Philistines followed them slaughtering at will. Three of Saul's sons - Jonathan among them - had been killed, and as the fighting closed in around Saul himself, he was wounded by an arrow. Unwilling to die at Philistine hands or become their prisoner, he committed suicide on his own sword.

Saul, his three sons and his armour bearer died together that day. When the Israelites across the valley saw that Saul and his sons were dead, and the men taking to flight, they abandoned their towns to the Philistines and fled.

The following day, when the Philistines came to strip the dead, they found Saul and his three sons lying on Mount Gilboa. They cut off his head and, stripping him of his armour, took it round the land of the Philistines to proclaim the good news to their idols and their people. They placed his armour in the temple of Astarte, and fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan. (I Sam 31:5-10)

It was indeed great good news to the Philistines. Saul was dead, and his sons too: their bodies hung on the town wall at Beth-shan. The Israelites were reduced to a leaderless rabble running to hide in the hills while the Philistines took what they wanted in the border land. They could well hope to mop up in a short time, having shattered the Israelite monarchy, for the scattered tribesmen would now dwindle till they disappeared altogether.

And to the Israelites themselves it must have seemed like the end of all their hopes. They had chosen a king, to be as strong and independent as their neighbours, but now the king was dead, his army and people scattered, and the powerful victories of Yahweh the warrior god seemed to have gone from them forever. Only for weeping was there space left in Israel:

Alas, the glory of Israel has been slain on your heights!
How did the heros fall?

Do not speak of it in Gath,
nor announce it in the streets of Ashkelon,
or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice;

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the daughters of the uncircumcised will gloat.

O mountains of Gilboa,
let there be no dew or rain on you;
trecherous fields,
where the hero's shield was dishonoured!

O daughters of Israel, weep for Saul
who clothed you in scarlet and fine linen,
who set brooches of gold
on your garments.

How did the heroes fall
and the battle armour fail?

(II Sam 1:19-27)

An Amalekite mercenary escaped from the battle, to bring the news to David. Thinking to gain favour, he boasted that he himself had killed Saul, but David had him executed, with the sentence: "Your blood be on your own head, for your own lips gave evidence against you, when you said 'I killed Yahweh's anointed.'"¹

After Saul's death, David was safe in Judah. He moved to Hebron, where he was accepted by the elders and anointed "king over the tribe of Judah".² One of Saul's sons, Ishbaal, ruled over such of the Israelites as he could reach from safe quarters beyond the Jordan, and there was fighting between the two kings' forces, but Ishbaal was a mere puppet in the hands of his own general, and even David was not always able to control the commander of his army.

Over the next few years, interested parties battled for power,³ settling old scores or creating new ones, scheming, betraying and murdering. While all around him Israelites were spilling one another's blood, David, though he fought, refused to direct his energies against his private enemies, or to hack his way to power over the dead bodies of rivals. He was willing to wait, and probably the more so as the most aggressive were killing each other off. By hindsight, his waiting game is seen to be the right and prudent one, but in the anarchy of his Israel there were few who saw it, and fighting men generally barred no holds in their desperate scramble for vengeance and power.

David met the challenge and temptation that faces all leaders, and all active, ambitious people. Whether your high hopes and ambitions are for yourself, or your children, or your party, or your church, it is tempting, especially when events seem to have reached a critical stage, to reach out and grab your goal by whatever means. In the crucial moments of history, when revolutionaries are seizing their historic opportunity, when all is up for

¹ II Sam 1:16 ² II Sam 2:1-4 ³ II Sam 2 - 4

grabs, and friends and opponents are snatching what they can, we are afraid of missing our chance, acutely conscious that if we do not look after ourselves, no one else will.

But unlike Saul, and unlike the bold Israelites who carried off the ark from Shiloh, David seemed to know, when he came to the most critical moments in his life, that he, his position and his destiny were in the hands of Yahweh, that Yahweh alone was the final master of events. It was no small achievement for a warrior, a leader used to fighting, skilled at strategy and boosted by early popularity. For such a man to accept that he cannot wrest his own destiny from events and must wait to receive it from God, is a matter of genuine faith. The faith that Yahweh required, and inspired in David, was the faith to let him achieve. It was a personal trust through which Yahweh himself could truly be said to rule his people, even while the king ruled them. By such trust, David was able to be king in Yahweh's name.

In time, when Ishbaal had been murdered by two of his own chiefs (who thereby gave David an excuse for putting them to death as punishment) David was able to rally a leaderless Israel behind him, and, in two encounters, showed that they could still defeat the Philistines. He followed up his success by capturing the Jebusite city of Jerusalem, which had survived the Israelite invasion even against the fierce warriors of Benjamin.

This gave the king, for his capital, a city that belonged to him and not to any of the separate tribes, and one that could be the centre and starting point for a new, reshaped Israel. Built on the hill of Zion, it was a valuable fortress, where David now established his court and his harem. There he was answerable to none, and from there he would govern all the tribes of Israel, and, in time, a wider empire that made subjects of such old enemies as the Moabites, the Edomites, the Arameans of Damascus, and even the Philistines themselves. But most important of all, Jerusalem and Mount Zion were to become a centre of Yahweh's worship, succeeding Shechem and Shiloh as the shrine and focus for Israel's faith.

David's new Israel had to have a god to worship, to rule them and lead them, and for David, the warrior, outlaw and conqueror of Jerusalem, that god could only be Yahweh. Although many of the tribal clans had mixed allegiances, with a fondness for various Canaanite gods, David's new start was a return to the primitive loyalty of Israel's outlaw days, the wilderness faith that trusted Yahweh and could no more serve a variety of gods than a warrior can follow a variety of leaders.

He decided to bring the ark of God from Kiriath-Jearim to his new fortress of Jerusalem, and so set out with a large escort, picked from all the tribes

...to bring the ark of God which bears the name of Yahweh Sabaoth, the Lord of armies. They placed the ark of God on a new cart and brought it from Abinadab's house which is on the hill. Abinadab's sons were leading the cart, Uzzah alongside and Ahio in front. David and all the Israelites danced with enthusiasm

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before Yahweh, singing to the music of lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets and cymbals.

(II Sam 6:2-6)

It must have been a fantastic moment. We are not to imagine the solemn niceties of liturgical dancing, of white-robed and sedate performers, but the wild, excited bounding and thrashing of warriors - perhaps a sword dance - every moment an explosion of strength and emotion, controlled to within an inch of blows that would kill. This was no remote or civilised Deity whose coming they celebrated, but Yahweh, the warrior leader, the Lord of Armies.

Then suddenly singers and dancers fell silent. Uzzah had put out his hand to steady the ark as the cart tilted, and he died on the spot. In a moment, they remembered that they were dealing with a dangerous god and a power not to be taken lightly - not a god to be carried around by his own enthusiasts, or needing the hand of a servant to steady his seat as it took a rough ride. David's enthusiasm drained away. He was all caution again, as if suddenly aware that he and his wild, leaping warriors were only children after all, playing before a power too strong for them, too real for them to cope with.

Not that we have to picture some miraculous manifestation of God or God's anger. It could have been any accident: perhaps the cart lurched and Uzzah was knocked over, hitting his head; perhaps at that moment some frenzied dancer miscalculated, with disastrous results. The details would not have been as important as the bare fact that Uzzah died when he touched the ark - and sudden death is the blazing out of Yahweh's anger. Their understanding of the power of God was, of course, superstitious, for he does not work like electricity, like blind magic operating automatically on physical contact. But they were not wrong about the fact of god's power. To believe in the power and the danger of God is not superstitious, for these are only too real. You are touching fire when you come into the presence of God.

David reacted as Israelites before him had done. The ark was taken to the house of Obed-Edom, a man of Gath (and so, I suppose, of Philistine connections) and deposited there for safety - not the ark's, but David's safety. Once again, foreigners were to have the doubtful privilege of giving hospitality to Yahweh. The ark stayed there for three months, and only when David saw that, far from coming to any harm, Obed-Edom was enjoying unusual luck and prosperity, did he resolve again to bring it on into Jerusalem.

The great procession was resumed, this time with sacrifices and holocausts all along the way. Dressed in the priestly linen loincloth, David blessed the people in Yahweh's name - but again this is no sedate and restrained ceremonial. David danced whirling like a dervish before the ark, and the crowd greeted its coming with shouts and horn blasts. Leaping and dancing all the way, David and his warriors brought the ark at last into the city, where he had pitched a tent to house it.