

10 The Covenant King

The darkness, the vice and the violence of David can match even what we discover in our own hearts, when civilisation and restraint are taken away, or self-delusion fails; yet he is remembered as an ideal ruler and faithful servant of Yahweh. His sins, though faithfully recorded in the Bible, were forgotten by poets and prophets of a later generation, and rightly so. For in his sins only the weak human David was at work, sowing trouble and division for later days. But in his faith the power of Yahweh was at work to accomplish his everlasting will for Israel.

Between the ideal David remembered in legend and enshrined in the songs of Israel, and the all too human king of the Book of Samuel, there is an awful difference, or contrast, but not an impossible contradiction. What I mean is that, great though the difference is, the reality of one human being in whom God is at work can encompass it all. The one person can be both saint and sinner. Many sinners have thought so. All saints have said so. The ideal David and the sinner stand apart in the Bible (to some extent) the one remembered in song and prophecy, the other portrayed in the court stories of Second Samuel and the First Book of Kings. But it is not a question of deciding which is the "true" David. For neither is. The true David was, I am sure, something more than the two put together, the full man known only to Yahweh his God.

The important thing is that the legend of David is as true as the other more "historical" view of him. Both centre on his faith, his trusting relationship with Yahweh, which is witnessed in the darkest parts of the history and celebrated in the more idealistic songs and prophecies, and which the Bible always remembers as the model relationship for Israel herself.

That trust could be savage and vengeful, but even then it was trust, looking to Yahweh as the one sure protector and executor of just vengeance:

Yahweh, more and more are turning against me,
more and more are rebelling against me,
more and more are saying about me,
"There is no help for him in his God."

But, Yahweh, my encircling shield,
my glory, you help me to hold up my head.
Loudly I cry to Yahweh,
and he answers me from his holy mountain.

Rise Yahweh! Save me, my God!
You hack all my enemies to the cheekbone,
you break the teeth of the wicked.
From Yahweh, rescue. On your people blessing!

(Ps 3:1-4, 7-8)

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That trust is the faith of a hard-fighting warrior, who, nonetheless, is not ashamed to admit his need of God's protection:

I love you, Yahweh, my strength.
Yahweh is my rock and my bastion,
my deliverer is my God.

He sends from on high and takes me,
he draws me back from the deep waters,
he delivers me from my powerful enemy,
from a foe too strong for me.

They assailed me on my day of disaster,
but Yahweh was my support;
he freed me, set me at large,
he rescued me, since he loves me.

(Ps 18:1-2, 16-19)

It is the faith of a man in desperate need, who in his roving, hand-to-mouth existence, like that of the first Israelites, turned to Yahweh, the god of wanderers and provider for his people: it is the faith that a shepherd and a warrior would both understand:

Yahweh is my shepherd,
I lack nothing.
In meadows of green grass he lets me lie.
To the waters of repose he leads me;
there he revives my soul.

He guides me by paths of virtue
for the sake of his name.
Though I pass through a valley of shadows,
I fear no harm,
beside me, your rod and your staff
are there to hearten me.

You prepare a table before me
under the eyes of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil,
my cup brims over.

Ah, how goodness and kindness pursue me,
every day of my life;
my home, the house of Yahweh,
as long as I live!

(Psalm 23)

You could say that David's rise to power, and the achievements of his reign, were the triumph of Yahweh's love for Israel. Under David, and through his wars, the Israelites not only united as one nation, but secured their independence and gained ascendancy over the once invincible Philistines. One after another, old enemies became subjects of David's extended empire: Moabites, Amalekites, Edomites and Arameans as far as Damascus in Syria. Under David, Israel ceased to be a loose and vulnerable federation and found itself the centre of a strong and growing empire, a kingdom prepared for an age in which kingdoms survived and tribes disappeared. The tribes of Israel began to pass from barbarism into order, from instability to strength, from chaos to government.

Through David, Yahweh achieved what he had long promised his people: the future for which he had won their trust that night they went out to the Sea of Reeds and escaped from Egypt:

This is your greatness Lord Yahweh; there is no one like you. Is there another people on earth like your people Israel, with a god setting out to redeem them and make them his people, to work great and terrible things on their behalf, to drive out nations and gods before his people? You have set up your people Israel to be your own people forever; and you, Yahweh, have become their God.

(II Sam. 7:22-24)

David had trusted Yahweh for himself and for his people. He had known that strong rulers do not make themselves, for most of the conditions and chances involved are beyond the control of any man, and so he recognised that only Yahweh could make him king over Israel, and guarantee a lasting dynasty. But David's faith was not focused on supernatural or miraculous interventions. An atheist would find it easy to believe in the events of David's life and rise to power, and would disagree only with the way they are told and interpreted. Yet in the Books of Samuel we are left in no doubt what that interpretation is: that in all these events Yahweh was at work, establishing his rule over Israel in the person of a king chosen by him and acceptable to him.

God does work through miracles, but not in the history of David. Here we meet again a God who is not cut off from the world we know, or in competition with it: but its natural lord and ruler, working in the phenomena of "nature" and through the character and decisions of human beings. It is a foolish habit of ours, born of the controversies that dominated for the last two hundred years, to divide the events and experiences of religious history into two kinds, "natural" and "miraculous". In fact, most of human history, including the history of our relationship with God, is neither natural phenomena (such as a scientist would observe and explain) nor miraculous events, but (not surprisingly) human behaviour - as inexplicable as human beings themselves are, but understandable in terms of human wishes, aspirations, efforts, communication, conflicts, fears. The history of our relationship with God is the history of human aspirations and God's will, the communication, conflict and cooperation between people and God, God's work with our trusting or resisting will. You can only understand or begin to explain it in terms of what people have tried to do, or wanted to do, and of what God has wanted and

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"tried" to do. So when we talk of David's trust in Yahweh and his rise to be king over Israel, we are not talking about miracles, nor about some natural, explainable phenomena. We are talking about human events, to be understood in terms of David's relationship with Yahweh, and Yahweh's relationship with Israel.

When Yahweh acts, he acts as one who is Lord. All things come under his control and nothing is able to rebuke him. He is the natural or proper ruler of physical events (like rain and wind and earth tremors) and of human desires and actions. He does not have to obliterate any of these, or to avoid them, for he is not in competition with them. Even those who resist him, or attempt to use him, remain under his rule. The rule of God, when he establishes it in this world, is not something that drives out of existence natural causes and free human choices or actions, but something that governs them so that the end result of all events and actions is to establish more fully his purpose for us.

Faith is therefore a kind of opportunism. For if God is in control of events, then your best policy is to remember it and watch for whatever he turns up. With David's kind of faith you recognise the work of God in a stream of opportunities, which you accept gratefully, instead of striving to create your own chances and struggling to mould a history that does not recognise you as its master. David's way was to trust in Yahweh, waiting to see what he would provide. And he rightly recognised his God-given opportunities not in his chances for murder or personal revenge, but in the moments Yahweh gave him for generosity, mercy and reconciliation.

David's faith was vindicated, for Yahweh is indeed the lord of events, and the opportunities David recognised were the right ones. It was by God's providing that he became king over Israel, just as he had thought it would be. His trust was not for some future life or reward after death, of which he knew nothing. It was for a definite promise here in the only place and life he knew. It was for his own protection and eventual triumph, his rule over Israel, and a dynasty to carry on his achievements after him.

I have said that faith is a kind of opportunism, but it is not an easy kind. It may fly in the face of all prudent reasoning. It may seem sheer madness, as when the Habiru made their escape from Egypt and found their opportunity in a trap between the Egyptian army and the Sea of Reeds. It may drag you upstream against conventional wisdom and the normal efforts of ambitious people, as it led David to pass up excellent chances in an age when a man's value was his ability to take bloody revenge, and when power was a prize for the quickest sword. In the end, faith outlives even opportunities, surviving as a firm relationship of trust even when there may be no more opportunities, as David's faith survived in the rebellion of Absalom.

David had learnt a great lesson: that Yahweh was indeed the ruler of Israel, to be followed in faith. By faith, David recognised not abstract statements about God's power and authority, but Yahweh's real power controlling his life and his destiny. He recognised God's voice, commanding and rebuking him, and he submitted. This kind of faith was the spark of something good in the heart of David, through which his relationship with God

could always go forward into the future. It was a faith that made him acceptable to God, so that, although we can criticise both his theology and his morals, he is still the man through whom God's rule over Israel went forward towards its fulfilment.

David's faith and Yahweh's acceptance took root in the imagination of Israel, to become the theme of songs and prayers:

I will celebrate your love forever, Yahweh,
age after age my words will proclaim your faithfulness;
for I claim that love is built to last forever,
and your faithfulness founded firmly in the heavens.

"I have made a covenant with my Chosen
I have given my servant David my sworn word:
I have founded your dynasty to last forever,
I have built you a throne to outlast all time.

"I have selected my servant David
and anointed him with my holy oil;
my hand will be constantly with him,
he can rely on my arm."

(Ps 89:1-4, 20-21)

David's reign was remembered as the beginning of a new and special covenant between Yahweh and his people: this time between Yahweh and his servant David, whom he had made king;

Yahweh swore to David and will remain true to his word,
"I promise that your own son shall succeed you on the throne.
If your sons observe my covenant, the decrees that I have taught
them,
their sons too shall succeed you on the throne for evermore."

(Ps 132:11-12)

It is with the story of this covenant that I want to finish our history of David's reign.

Once he was established on the throne and had made Jerusalem his fortress capital, David planned a new home for the ark of Yahweh, a temple to replace the tent as Yahweh's house among his people. It was a worthy ambition. David, and with him Israel, owed everything to Yahweh, and since he himself now lived in a royal building, a properly constructed palace, it seemed only right that he should build Yahweh a fitting temple. Surely if Yahweh had made Israel a kingdom not only to copy but to rival the kingdoms around them, they could build him a temple to rival the temples of the gods of other nations: a permanent and magnificent house.

But through the prophet Nathan Yahweh checked this ambition with an answer that showed his thoughts were very different from the thoughts of David and Israel's

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successful new leaders. This answer recalls Yahweh's ancient relationship with Israel. The wild, rough adventures they had shared in the wilderness and in the long years of the conquest had something that civilisation and its secure structures should never replace. Yahweh preferred to remain the warrior leader camping in his tent as if with a travelling people, and he was reluctant to assume the gilded and solid grandeur of a "god" in his temple.

That night, the word of Yahweh came to Nathan: "Go and tell my servant David: 'Are you the man to build me a house? I have never stayed in a house from the day I brought the Israelites out of Egypt until today, but have always led a wanderer's life in a tent. In all my journeying with Israel, did I say to any of their leaders: Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'" (II Sam. 7:4-7)

Then, as if to emphasise that he, Yahweh, is David's benefactor, and not the other way round, he goes on to promise him greatness, security, and a lasting dynasty. It is a promise of that permanent security which Israel had failed to achieve as separate, covenanted tribes.

Tell my servant David: "I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be leader of my people Israel. I have been with you on all your expeditions; I have cut off all your enemies before you. I will give you fame as great as the fame of the greatest on earth. I will make you a House. And when your days are ended and you are laid to rest with your ancestors, I will preserve the offspring of your body after you and make his sovereignty secure. If he does evil, I will punish him with the rod, such as men use. Yet I will not withdraw my favour from him, as I withdrew it from Saul. Your house and your sovereignty will always stand secure before me. (II Sam 7:8-16)

It is, or seems to be, God's answer to the crucial question of the monarchy: whether God's rule can ever be invested in a dynasty, as power and authority passing from father to son. There is indeed no mention of the tremendous charismatic power of his own spirit - that wild, free and dangerous gift no longer seems to be offered as the guarantee of Israel's security - but there is a promise of permanence. David is not to build Yahweh a permanent house, but Yahweh will make the "House of David" a lasting dynasty and will not desert it. He speaks of correcting, of weak and wilful kings to come who will need the rod of punishment, but he guarantees that he will always be with them, and through them rule and protect Israel, his people.

But it is an answer that raises its own questions. On the one hand, the covenant that Yahweh makes with David appears to be an unconditional gift and guarantee. On the other, it appears that there were conditions. Here, in the passage I have just quoted, the covenant is a promise on Yahweh's part, without condition, to secure David's throne and dynasty forever: even the sins of kings to come will call down correction, rather than annulment. But Psalm 132, which I quoted above, preserves another view: that God's promise would depend on the kings keeping his covenant:

If your sons observe my covenant, the decrees that I have taught them, their sons shall succeed you on the throne for evermore. (v.12)

Here, there is a condition, an "if", and, as with the institution of the monarchy, the Bible is presenting us with two views. As before, we must look for the whole truth not somewhere in between, but in a larger vision, encompassing both views.

Yahweh made a promise to David, guaranteeing the future of his dynasty, and of the kingdom of Israel. It was unconditional in that, like the earlier acts of Yahweh on Israel's behalf, it was not Yahweh's grateful response for something Israel had done: it was nothing David did, no favour he conferred on Yahweh that "earned" this promise. In fact, the promise was made at the very moment when Yahweh was rebuking him for imagining he could confer a favour on his God. Nor could it in any way depend on some future service or duty that David or his descendants would render Yahweh. And yet, like the earlier covenants, like the whole relationship between Yahweh and his people, it did depend on keeping faith - not some act of faith that earned God's favour, but rather the faith that you must show to accept an unconditional gift: the trust that is part of giving and receiving.

Remember David's division of the spoils after he caught up with the Amalekites. The giving of gifts was not just a bribe or a wage, but something that signified a special relationship between David and his troops, and between David and the leaders of Judah. In accepting a bribe or payment, you agree to perform a certain limited task, a favour in return for a favour. In accepting a gift, you enter a more permanent relationship as friend, ally, dependant or follower. A bribe, which is a gift with strings, puts you under an explicit and brief obligation. A pure gift, which is without strings, brings you into a more permanent obligation: a relationship to be valued and honoured. That is why I said that trust is part of receiving, even with unconditional gifts.

We get confused about gifts and giving for two reasons. One is the temptation common in every age, to reduce giving to a commercial transaction. We become materialistic about giving and all our concern is focused anxiously on the price of a gift, its saleable value, the price of what we are given ourselves, or the price of what we gave last time. We become greedy about gifts; or in our pride we become competitive and showy. When this happens, the personal elements of love, honour, affection, gratitude, are debased or disappear. In a society like ours, which is fast losing its grip on human relationships, materialism, vanity and self-consciousness take over our giving, as they take over everything else. Christmas becomes a threat or a competition, children's birthdays a brief and vapid imitation of family affection, and our whole experience of gift-giving is infected with fear and disappointment.

The other reason for confusion is our suspicion about the strings attached to giving. "What's his angle?" "What's the catch?" "What are they getting out of it?" Our cynicism has been sharpened by advertising, by a flood of "free" giveaways, and by our sad

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experience of the promises and election-time goodies that keep the wheels of democracy turning. Paradoxically, we have come to expect both too much and too little. On the one hand, we have imagined a false ideal of giving, in which giving and receiving have no implications whatsoever for the future - no strings at all - and on the other, we strongly suspect that no giving ever comes up to this standard, so that it is all hypocritical, underlaid with human self-interest and greed.

You can see it most clearly in the "permissive" attitude to giving in sexual intercourse. There is a popular journalistic dream of an "ideal" detachment in which a man and a woman give themselves, their bodies, to each other simply for the enjoyment of the "gift" and for as long as it is still enjoyable. Then, in a "mature and adult" way, they part: no further conditions or demands, no jealousies, recriminations or regrets. When this dream is not realised, in spite of our freedom from "moral hang-ups", the dreamers blame it on human selfishness or weakness, possessiveness or timidity, and look to an imaginary future when couples will be more "sophisticated", and adult enough to give themselves in the brief and detached encounters of truly "free" love.

I have given this example not to begin a digression on sex, but because it shows most clearly the misunderstanding about giving that affects a lot of our thinking. Human giving is not, and should not be, without implications. Such "ideal" giving probably only exists in the lesser animals, when parents instinctively give to their young - as a mother magpie dropping worms into the squawking and voracious throats of her demanding chicks.

Giving which is truly human and genuinely selfless, always has implications. In fact, the further giving is from being a bribe or a transaction, the more serious and permanent are its implications. If I exchange gifts with a relation at Christmas, each of us calculating costs so as not to fail or exceed our duty, it signifies no more than the nodding recognition of our family connection. But when a friend gives, and I willingly accept, a gift more costly than I could afford in return, that shows a deeper relationship of love and trust on both sides. If a man gives a prostitute a piece of jewellery and she accepts it, a bargain has been struck. The prostitute can soon fulfil her obligations and conclude the transaction. But if a girl accepts a ring from a man she loves, it is a sign of a relationship that life should never exhaust, of a commitment that is permanent. It is precisely the gift without "strings" (in the mercenary sense) that has the most permanent implications. A gift that involves no return in kind commits you more deeply than one which merely requires a return gift of similar cash value. Therefore it takes deep trust to receive a free gift, for the relationship you enter thereby is a serious and long-lasting one.

(The notion of giving, and especially free, generous giving as a sovereign act of God, is fundamental to Christian faith and theology, and some of our most serious errors and divisions arise because it is misunderstood. There are those who, faced with the "free gift of God in Jesus Christ", cannot believe it is free, and strive to earn it by works or religious observance. And there are those who, insisting that the gift of salvation is free, deny, in effect, that it has any implications: they argue that it is accepted in a once-and-

for-all moment after which nothing a person does can make any real difference. Both are wrong. Both misunderstand not only divine giving but also human giving. In particular, they misunderstand free and sovereign giving. Where giving is most sovereign, most free from restraint and obligation, there it implies the deepest trust and most committed relationship.)

If David had restricted the sharing of booty to those who had earned it with their swords, he would not have been Yahweh's man, but only an ordinary gang leader. His giving and their receiving would have signified little more than a commercial transaction. By recognising that the booty came from the sovereign generosity of Yahweh, and should be generously shared even with his weaker followers, David bound them all together, himself, his followers, and their god Yahweh, in a significant and lasting relationship. In the same way, by sharing with the elders of Judah, he invited them to enter into a more permanent obligation than any they could discharge simply by a similar gift from their own next success. It was a free gift from Yahweh, through David, to them, not expecting payment, but inviting a more lasting commitment than mere "payment due" ever involves.

It is against this background of relationships, of sovereignty and trust expressed in the free giving and receiving of gifts that we must see the covenant Yahweh made with David. The giving begins with the one who is sovereign of all. He, Yahweh, freely initiates the offer, and what he gives is of his own generosity, offered to David and to Israel as a gift of love and not as a reward earned by them. To accept it involves them in no obligation to pay for it - the love and protection of Yahweh could never be paid for - but it does bring them into a serious and permanent relationship with him, the breaking of which would be far more serious and disastrous than any mere default on payment.

That is why the covenant has to be represented in two ways, each complementing the other. It is a free, unconditional gift. No payment came before it, and none will be demanded after. But it commits Yahweh and the one who accepts his gift to a deep personal relationship, the denial of which would be destructive of the covenant itself.

The rule of God is a permanent relationship with his people, a covenant: not a one-way unconditional benefit, like a celestial bit of good luck that the Israelites happened to stumble upon; nor a conditioned contract, defining specific obligations which it would be possible to discharge and be finished with. It is an open-ended, unconditional, unreserved commitment between Yahweh and Israel, that pledges him to giving and them to receiving his love, without term or limit.