1

Slings and Arrows

Remembering King David

How many are the ways we remember David – that striking, brash lad who strides confidently upon the stage of history and, with one well-aimed shot of the sling, launches a career that has bedazzled generations for 3,000 years. We know David as majestic king and lowly shepherd boy, as valiant warrior and soothing singer, as ruthless killer and passionate lover, as enraptured dancer and pious saint.

No other figure has the mysterious magnetism that makes David such a beloved hero. His are tales of intrigue and adventure, tenderness and pain. Courageous, cunning, and complex, David lives life to the hilt. He exudes vitality and vulnerability. Whatever he does, he does with all his might. No wonder it has been said that Israel revered Moses but loved David.

"David in his faults and attainments, his losses and victories, embodies on a scale almost beyond imagining the action of *living a life*." So captures the poet Robert Pinsky the meaning of David. Paving the way for Pinsky's appreciation, the literary critic Harold Bloom observed, David "had exhausted every human possibility yet went on in fullness of being – open to more experience, more love, more grief, more guilt and suffering, more dancing in exuberance before the Ark of Yahweh." David's all-eclipsing vitality and passion prompted Bloom to assert famously that the woman who authored the oldest biblical source ("J" or the "Yahwist") created YHWH in the image of David.[1]

To later generations, the Bethlehemite both inaugurated and embodies Israel's golden age. He possessed a Midas touch that turned every obstacle into another secure step to glory, rising higher and higher on the rickety scaffolding of Saul's tumbling house.

Can any other biblical biography rival David's? In his novel *God Knows*, Joseph Heller, celebrated author of *Catch-22*, has the dying monarch reflect on his greatness:

> I don't like to boast – but I honestly think I've got the best story in the Bible. Where's the competition? . . . Moses isn't bad, I have to admit, But he's very, very long, and there's a crying need for variation after the exodus from Egypt. . . . I've got the poetry and passion, savage violence and the plain raw civilizing grief of human heartbreak. "The beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places." That sentence is mine and so is "They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions." My psalms last. I could live forever on my famous elegy alone, if I wasn't already dying of old age. I've got wars and ecstatic religious experiences, obscene dances, ghosts, murders, hair-raising escapes, and exciting chase scenes. There were children who died early. "I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me." That's for the one who died in infancy. . . . "My son, my son" was for another who was struck down in the prime of young manhood. Where in Moses can you find stuff like that?[2]

Yet David also presents problems. Undoubtedly he is a pivotal figure in the formation of the nation, forging a kingdom, capturing Jerusalem, initiating the construction of the Temple, establishing an enduring dynasty. Undoubtedly, too, he is the most fully delineated character in the Bible, the subject of the most colorful, detailed, and revealing tales. But there is more to his story than the glitz of glory. David is also calculating, ruthless, and cold – exceedingly so. Why did the biblical authors depict him in this way? In their estimation, was the precious price he paid for success worth the suffering?

Careerist and Survivor

David's portrait differs sharply from Saul's. As Israel's first king according to the biblical narrative, Saul doesn't set his sights on the throne. Instead he happens to find it while looking for lost

donkeys. At the time he's anointed, they discover him hiding among the baggage. Kingship is not his ambition, and to his dying moment he harbors deep self-doubt. Insecurities, lack of faith, and angst accelerate his demise.

Not so David. He lacks not one ounce of confidence. As the youngest of eight boys, the odds are stacked against him. But the disadvantage only makes him more determined. "Whether 'tis Nobler in the mind to suffer / The Slings and Arrows of outrageous Fortune, / Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles . . . ." The shepherd boy leaves his little flock to bring bread and cheese to his brothers on the front lines, and he returns a fêted national champion.

Whereas Israel's soldiers flee in terror before Goliath, David wants to know what prize awaits the one who fells the giant. His oldest brother discerns his motives:

> "Why did you come down here, and with whom did you leave those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your impudence and your impertinence: you came down to watch the fighting!"
>
> But David replied, "What have I done now? I was only asking!" (1 Sam 17:28–29)

But sooth to say, David does have grander designs. After learning that the champion would walk away with great riches and the king's own daughter, he resolves to go out against Goliath. With the most brazen assertiveness, he approaches King Saul:

> "Let no man's courage fail him. Your servant will go and fight that Philistine!"
>
> But Saul said to David, "You cannot go to that Philistine and fight him; you are only a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth!"
>
> David replied to Saul, "Your servant has been tending his father's sheep, and if a lion or a bear came and carried off an animal from the flock, I would go after it and fight it and rescue it from its mouth. And if it attacked me, I would seize it by the beard and strike it down and kill it. Your servant has killed both lion and bear; and that uncircumcised Philistine shall end up like one of them, for he has defied the ranks of the living God." (1 Sam 17:31–37)

Thanks to unwavering faith in his own future, he manages to overcome all obstacles, on the battlefield and beyond.

David's self-confidence is irresistible. He knows how to manipulate the masses. Unlike Saul, he neither fears them nor surrenders to them. Yet everyone fears David, and many love him. Saul's own children, Jonathan and Michal, willingly betray their father for this usurper. After his premature death, Saul's general Abner crosses over to David's side. An array of figures – priests, soldiers, leaders, women, and anonymous individuals – do his dirty work. To the very end, they are motivated by unflinching loyalty. He is the original "Teflon Don." Even when we know he's guilty, nothing sticks to him. On account of his friends' allegiance, his hands remain clean, and he comes out of the most compromising situations smelling like the Rose of Sharon.

Many may love David, to be sure. But whom does David love? Michal? Probably not. Jonathan? Perhaps. Himself? Most certainly.[3]

David's self-love and confidence give him an unfailing sense of timing. There is nothing rash or impulsive about his actions. He stages his success with impeccable strategy. His eyes are firmly fixed on the throne as he wields his private army against Judah's enemies and distributes shares of his war spoils with those who, predictably, will later anoint him king. At each step of the way – whether he's making his escape or returning from exile – we witness him acting at the auspicious moment. He makes his move only when he's certain that all his pawns are in formation.

The scion of Jesse is the quintessential survivor. In this regard he anticipates both the history of his dynastic line and the life of his people. He begins his career dodging Saul's spear. Hounded by the armies of Israel, he goes on the lam, hiding in the cracks and crevices of Judah's desert. Eventually he seeks refuge among the Philistines, Israel's most dangerous enemies. Then, long after he assumes Saul's throne, he is chased out again, this time by his own son Absalom. Returning to his refugee existence, he seeks asylum far away from the comforts of Jerusalem. Later, on his way back to the palace, the country erupts in another rebellion.

He must face a famine and a plague. Death consumes those round about him.

In the end, David is left shivering and hanging on for his dear life. To get some heat into his war-weary bones, he curls up next to a young body. It is there, in the bed he made over the course of his tumultuous life, that he grants Bathsheba an audience and yields the throne to her son Solomon. It is there too that, before going the way of all the earth, he admonishes Solomon to "be a man," to follow YHWH, and to settle his father's scores.

David's Women

"The story of David," Robert Alter writes, "is probably the single greatest narrative representation in antiquity of a human life evolving by slow stages through time, shaped and altered by the pressures of political life, public institutions, family, the impulses of body and spirit, the eventual sad decay of the flesh."[4]

As a way of tracing these stages of David's life, let us briefly examine his relations to women. There are four leading ladies in the narratives, and each corresponds to a phase in David's life. His interactions with them provide a litmus test of his success and failure.

In the first phase David is a wonder boy, climbing upward, sleeping his way to the top. The first woman on his path is the princess Michal. She is the boss's daughter, and she loves David, just as her brother does and father once did. But for David, she is not the goal – she's just a means: "It pleased David to be the king's son-in-law." Whereas Jacob loves Rachel, David yearns for royalty and glory.

Once he escapes through Michal's window, he returns no more. Just one scene later, he is back in town for several days, spending time with Michal's brother Jonathan, shooting arrows, and taking a tearful farewell. They kiss each other, which is perhaps more than David and Michal have ever done. Does she know that he is now within a bowshot of her window? What goes down a rope can just as easily come up. But now she will

have to make do with the household idol and goat's hair that she once placed in her bed as a decoy.

Over the years David marries other women as he gradually establishes his Judahite kingdom in the south. During this time Saul had given Michal to another man. When Saul dies, David aspires to be king of Israel and sends for the princess, describing her as his possession: "my wife whom I bought with the bride-price of a hundred Philistine foreskins." His interest is motivated by his determination to mount a new throne. In contrast to David's calculations, the man to whom Saul had given Michal follows her in a trail of tears, devastated at the thought of losing his beloved spouse.

If Michal is the boss's daughter, David's wife Abigail is a "discerning and comely woman" who proves to be a fitting counterpart. We meet her when David is a wily outlaw, living by the sword and running a protection racket. He's a man on the make, doing what he does best.

Because Abigail's wealthy husband refuses to pay for the security services, David decides to make an example of him. Yet in the nick of time, Abigail intercepts the warlord with an array of costly victuals. The elegant address she delivers is longer than that of any other woman in the Bible. She speaks his language, convincing him with an appeal not to fairness or kindness, but to practicality and expediency. David listens, alters his course of action, and thanks her for preventing him from messy bloodshed. When her husband hears of the matter, he has a stroke and eventually dies, leaving his wife to marry David.

Abigail is not only a clever and eloquent partner but also an affluent widow. Not surprisingly, in this stage of his career, David prospers and becomes a powerful political player.

When David has his dalliance with Bathsheba, he's at the zenith of his career. He has successfully seized the throne of Israel and expanded the kingdom's border far beyond what Saul could have imagined. This is the perfect time for a midlife crisis.

Bathsheba is ostensibly just a sex object whom David beds at will. But the romp represents much more. The king is in Jerusalem while his men are dying on the battlefield. This is already a violation of a pact: When the people of Israel make him their king, they declare,

> "We are your own flesh and blood. Long before now, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led Israel in war; and Yhwh said to you: 'You shall shepherd my people Israel; you shall be ruler of Israel.'" (2 Sam 5:1–2)

Yet David is no longer shepherding YHWH's people. Instead, he's sending them on an imperial mission to expand his kingdom's territory, while he stays back in the palace.

Just as he takes possession of forbidden territories, he illicitly seizes a woman, and the one he chooses is married to a man who is serving him in the field. It is the arrogance of power, and it will not go unpunished.

"All that is solid melts into air." First his infant child dies. Then his family disintegrates, with one son, Amnon, raping his own sister Tamar. David fails to mete out discipline, so that another son, Absalom, takes matters into his own hands and slays Amnon. Later Absalom, in Oedipal fashion, seduces the hearts of Israel, steals his father's throne, and sleeps publicly with David's concubines.

The pain that David undergoes is greater than that of losing his throne. He suffers from betrayal by his cherished son, and then from his death. The father's haunting cry is deafening:

> "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son." (2 Sam 18:33)

Once David had eloquent words for grief. Now he is reduced to a broken cry, repeating a few words over and over – the price David pays for success.

The fourth woman is Abishag, David's hot-water bottle. We meet her during David's final days, when he's losing his body heat and relinquishing his power. His servants use robes to maintain

his temperature, but to no avail. They then conduct a search throughout the land for a fair damsel who will warm him up, and they find Abishag, the beautiful Shunamite.

"Yet the king knew her not." The calefaction doesn't work. David is now impotent. More virile rulers will vie for the throne. In the next scene, one of his sons, the attractive Adonijah, announces that he will reign. David has one final opportunity to assert himself, and when he does, he will take his cue from a woman.

Abishag steps aside to make way for Bathsheba. No longer a passive sex object, the former wife of Uriah is now a woman of presence and authority who capably persuades the king to go ahead and allow her son Solomon to reign. All his life David was deft at manipulating others; now he is subject to manipulation. In keeping with his wife's entreaty, he lets go of the kingdom he built. Solomon is crowned, and David dies as he was born – a non-king.

How difficult it must be for a king to decide to relinquish control of his kingdom. Are we to understand that David has had a change of heart? Does a thirst for power not drive his actions still? Is David no longer David?

The decision to abdicate his throne to Solomon turns out, after all, to be extraordinarily astute. For no longer is David obliged to keep the promises he made long ago. He can charge his son, as the new king, to finish his business, rewarding friends and taking vengeance on the enemies he had once sworn to pardon. And this is exactly how David spends his final hours. As he begins his life, so he ends it: calculating his advantage.

Why David?

So why have the biblical writers devoted so much space to David's life? And why have I chosen to write another book about him?

Composing a biography of Israel's celebrated king in 1943, the British diplomat Alfred Duff Cooper, 1st Viscount Norwich, insisted that the biblical account of this figure must be factual because no people would invent a national hero so deeply flawed.

Many contemporary biblical scholars have arrived at the same conclusion about the historicity of the David accounts, albeit via an alternate route. Reading the narratives with Shakespearean suspicion ("the lady doth protest too much, me thinks," *Hamlet* III.2), they notice that the authors of the David accounts go to the greatest lengths to demonstrate David's innocence. He is *not* in the ranks of the Philistine armies when Saul and his sons die in battle on Mount Gilboa. To the contrary, he is deeply grieved at the news of their death, executing the messenger who conveys it, rending his garments in anguish, fasting, and teaching a dirge to his fellow Judahites.

The biblical writers make similar claims about the deaths of other members of Saul's and Jonathan's descendants, as well as Saul's general Abner. On the one hand, David's right-hand men wipe out Saul's house. On the other hand, he is consistently enraged by their violence and takes punitive action against them. If the biblical writers protest with such force that David was blameless – so it is typically argued – they must have completed their accounts soon after David's death. Therefore, to understand the narratives properly, one must interpret them as an *apologia pro vita sua* or *pro domo sua* (a defense of his life or household), composed in the court of Solomon or his immediate successors.

This approach seems reasonable enough, and not surprisingly many have embraced it. The problem is that it fails to explain the texts that are critical of David.[5]

In the foregoing pages, I noted how the biblical narratives portray him as a leader driven by a thirst for power. To bring Duff Cooper's observation to bear on this popular interpretation, one would expect these narratives to have presented a much more favorable image of Judah's king if their purpose were to defend the dynasty's founder and reputation.

Imagine that the Davidic court had commissioned a group of scribes to compose an account of David's life that vindicates his conduct vis-à-vis Saul's household. Would these scribes have ever thought to submit a work to their royal patron that contains a shedload of passages describing David's raw ambition, failures,

and ruthlessness? Had they done so, they would have rightly feared for not only their livelihoods but also their lives.

Their biography doesn't just fail to proffer a sufficiently positive portrait of David. It even includes portions that depict David mistreating Saul's family. Take, for example, his brusque treatment of Saul's daughter Michal in 2 Samuel 6. Even more telling is the account in 2 Samuel 21, where he appeases the Gibeonites by allowing them to slaughter, in the most barbaric manner, seven of Saul's descendants. Only when Rizpah, Saul's concubine, refuses to relent from her public protest does he take it upon himself to do something favorable for Saul's house.

What we need then is a more plausible, and robust, model to explain why the biblical authors composed such colorful, detailed, and revealing tales about David. Such is precisely the *raison d'être* of the present volume.[6]

How will I interpret the David materials in the following chapters? And why I have chosen to include in this book several chapters about the figure of Caleb?

No one can deny the presence of a series of passages in the Book of Samuel that exonerate David's name by underscoring either his solicitude for Saul's house or his moral ascendancy over his royal predecessor. These texts most likely emerged, however, long after David's death, as they are easier to understand as part of the ongoing rivalry between the states of Israel and Judah. David represents the kingdom of Judah, and Saul the kingdom of Israel. By showing how the founder of their dynasty was the divinely chosen and morally superior leader, the kings of Judah invite the members of Israel to join them and submit to their rule.

The number of passages that fall into this category is relatively minimal. What remains are two different types of texts: those that articulate a penetrating critique of royal power and statehood, and those that treat issues of status and belonging in Judahite society. These two types include some of the most fascinating and popular tales of David.

In the coming chapters of this book, I will explore exemplary selections of the David narratives from the books of Samuel,