

Books of Samuel

8. David's Decline

Although the David narrative reads as a continuous story for nearly two books of the Bible, it tends to lurch somewhat from theme to theme. The opening chapters are about David and Saul (and Saul's family), in which David is pure success; then there is the period in the wilderness, where David struggles somewhat and is forced to take desperate measures; then the establishing of his monarchy, containing his accomplishments as a statesman and the consolidation and growth of his power; then the Bathsheba interlude where his power is abused. Now, in the final chapters of his story, we are introduced rather suddenly to David's sons, who have gone entirely unmentioned until now. Many scholars identify this portion of the narrative as a once-independent literary piece, known as the Succession Narrative, as it deals primarily with the question of how Solomon came to succeed David on the throne: through the progressive elimination of his older brothers. Whether this theory is correct or not, the recognition that these chapters are about the issue of dynastic succession is surely accurate. We may also note that the eventuality of Solomon's accession to the throne is never really in question. First, because the text as it currently stands must have been finalized after Solomon had, historically, succeeded David; but also, because even in the one verse narrating Solomon's birth, in 2 Samuel 12:24, we are told that "the Lord favored him." We should read these chapters therefore not as dramatic narrative with an unexpected ending, but rather as explanation: how is it that Solomon, fourth in line for the throne, was the one to actually get it?

David's eldest son is Amnon, who is featured in 2 Samuel 13. He is a faintly pathetic figure, characterized almost entirely by his incestual infatuation with his half-sister Tamar. Amnon tricks Tamar into tending him as he pretends to be ill, and rapes her. There are two

noteworthy aspects of this horrific episode. First, Tamar's response to Amnon's advances reveals something of the social system in ancient Israel. She does not object to the idea of sleeping with Amnon, or even becoming his wife, despite their half-sibling relationship; rather, her objection is to the forcible nature of Amnon's intentions. She says, "Please speak to the king; he will not refuse me to you" (13:13). The shame that Tamar bears is the social stigma of having been deflowered outside the bonds of marriage. Had Amnon wanted to simply marry her, their relationship would have been socially acceptable. The second aspect of the story worthy of attention is the psychological insight afforded by the biblical authors regarding Amnon. As soon as he has slept with Tamar, we are told, "Amnon felt a very great loathing for her; indeed, his loathing for her was greater than the passion he had felt for her." What we see here is all too familiar: the rejection of that which was once so desired upon having finally gained it. In both respects, Amnon is made out as an utter cad, undeserving of his father's crown (despite the close resemblance between Amnon's actions and those of David with Bathsheba).

Absalom, Tamar's full brother, takes his revenge on Amnon by having him killed—thus eliminating the first of David's sons in the line of succession. We may observe the strong set of parallels between the Amnon-Tamar story and narratives from the patriarchal cycle. Foremost among these, of course, is the other Tamar, in Genesis 38, who is similarly the victim of sexual impropriety. But we should also be conscious of the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34, and of the brief notice regarding Reuben, Jacob's firstborn son, who sleeps with Jacob's concubine in Genesis 35:22. It is because of this act of filial sexual deviance that Reuben is disinherited by Jacob in Genesis 49; it seems not coincidental that Amnon is similarly removed from the succession for his act of filial sexual deviance.

David forces Absalom to flee for his life, although only for a period: eventually, David brings Absalom back into the fold, with encouragement from Joab. (Joab, like Nathan, knows that the only way to convince David that he has made a mistake is to explain it to him as a parable; thus, he sends the wise woman of Tekoa to get David to implicate himself.) But upon Absalom's re-entrance into David's life, in 2 Samuel 15, he begins to act against his father. He puts on the trappings of kingship: a chariot, horses, and runners. He intercepts those who have come to the king to seek justice, and declares (to each one of them!) that he would rule in their favor. In this way, we are told, "Absalom won away the hearts of the men of Israel" (15:6). Eventually, Absalom makes his way to Hebron—the very city where David was first declared king—and effectively declares a coup. "The people supported Absalom in increasing numbers" (15:12). The speed with which Absalom is able to turn the people away from David belies the claims elsewhere that the Israelite population loved David and everything that he did. In fact, we should remember that David became king by force, certainly in the north, where he defeated Abner and Ishboshet to gain the throne. Whether Absalom promised a new kind of leadership, or merely a change from David, it is clear that the people seemed to prefer anyone to David.

David also recognizes just how quickly he has lost control of his people, and he and his court abandon the palace to Absalom and flee across the Jordan. In the process of this departure, a man named Shimei launches into a verbal assault on David: "The Lord is paying you back for all your crimes against the family of Saul, whose throne you seized!" (16:8). This accusation seems to represent what must have been a common view of how David became king—indeed, it seems to be the view that the biblical authors argued so strenuously against in 1 Samuel. David, in his moment of greatest weakness, sees that he does not have the power to fight back—at least, not yet. Shimei's insults ring out, unanswered, as David abdicates the throne.

In the ancient world, as even in modern dictatorships and autocratic societies, there could be only two possible outcomes in a coup attempt. Either the ruler or the usurper must die: neither, if victorious, can allow the other to live. (Modern examples are abundant; the succession of rulers in contemporary Egypt may be the closest example, formally as well as geographically.) Thus, Absalom's revolt was destined to end with either Absalom king and David dead, or David king and Absalom dead. Both would have known this; Absalom seems not to have any inclinations in any other direction, and while David may tell his men not to kill Absalom, he too would have known that it would have to end that way. Thus, when David does end up victorious, we should not be surprised that Joab kills Absalom. Whether David instructed him to do so or not, Joab was taking the only real course of action available to him. The possibility that David knew Absalom would die does not, of course, diminish the remarkable pathos of his wailing upon being told that Absalom is dead: "My son Absalom! O my son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you! O Absalom, my son, my son!" (19:1). David's second son has now been removed from the succession.

With Absalom dead, David once again ascends to Jerusalem and retakes his crown. But it is not as easy as it was before: his power has been proven to be shakier than it once was, and the populaces not nearly as supportive, or at least malleable, as they once were. This seems to be particularly the case in the northern kingdom of Israel, represented in the story by a rebel named Sheba, who proclaims the famous words, "We have no portion in David, no share in Jesse's son! Every man to his tent, O Israel!" (20:1). This rebellious call reminds us, and the inhabitants of Israel, that David is from Judah, that the northern kingdom had a long history of independence, and that there was little advantage to be gained from remaining part of David's now weakening monarchy. Although Sheba's rebellion fails, and Sheba himself does not survive, his words

would echo later at the end of Solomon's reign, when the united monarchy of David would split back into Judah and Israel, never again to be reunited.

The story of David's life has a significant gap in it: from the end of Absalom's revolt we effectively jump to the end of David's life in the first two chapters of 1 Kings. There is no notice that any substantial time passes—at least, nothing happens that should take very many years—yet at the beginning of the book of Kings we are presented with a very different David from the forceful man we have grown accustomed to. The book of Kings begins with this description: “King David was now old, advanced in years; and though they covered him with bedclothes, he never felt warm.” David will never rise from his bed again. And it is in this situation that the question of succession becomes most pressing: who will lead the kingdom in David's stead? There are only two contenders remaining: Adonijah, who is next in line for the throne, and Solomon—who has not been mentioned at all since his birth back in 2 Samuel 12.

Adonijah would seem to have the stronger claim. Indeed, he, like his brother Absalom before him, takes on the trappings of kingship: chariots, horses, and runners. Yet this is not treated as a coup, by David or by anyone else. In fact, David's two most trusted advisors throughout his reign, his general Joab and his priest Abiathar, give their support to Adonijah. We should probably understand this as a *de facto* co-regency, a common system in the ancient Near East for transitioning power between an aging ruler and the next in line. Yet there were some, evidently, who were unhappy with this new reality: foremost among them the prophet Nathan, who has also not appeared since Solomon's birth.

Nathan's role in Solomon's accession to the throne is interesting, as it draws attention to the role that Nathan plays throughout David's life. Though he is most famous for delivering the oracle against David in the Bathsheba story, we may observe that Nathan appears only three

times in total: in 2 Samuel 7, in 2 Samuel 11, and here in 1 Kings 1. In all three, the focus of Nathan's activity is not really David, but Solomon: in 2 Samuel 7 Nathan tells David that his son (Solomon) will be the one to build the Temple; in 2 Samuel 11 we have the story of Solomon's birth; and here we have Nathan advancing Solomon's interests in the crown. Though Nathan looks to be David's royal prophet (as, for example, Isaiah was the royal prophet to Hezekiah), it might be more accurate to see Nathan as Solomon's prophet.

Nathan looks to take advantage of David's weakened state. He instructs Bathsheba to tell David that the king had, at some point in the past, declared that Solomon would be his rightful heir. "Did not you, O lord king, swear to your maidservant, 'Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit upon my throne?'" (1 Kgs 1:13). This conversation, so far as we know, never actually happened; indeed, Nathan seems to admit as much when he says to Bathsheba, "While you are there talking with the king, I will come in after you and confirm your words" (1 Kgs 1:14). David is old, his body weak and his mind muddled; Nathan and Bathsheba are planting a false memory. The plan works: David confirms Solomon as the king, and instructs his general Benaiah, his priest Zadok, and Nathan to take Solomon and have him anointed.

In theory, this would create a relatively balanced situation: both Adonijah and Solomon would have one general and one priest on their side, and both with legitimate claims to kingship, be it by birth order or by royal decree. Yet Solomon has one other group on his side that will end up swaying the decision: David's private militia, known as the Cherethites and the Pelethites. These were the forces that David mustered to defeat Absalom, and they had been the source of his authority throughout his reign, and probably even before that, in the wilderness. Now they were on the side of Solomon, and Adonijah would have known that he had no chance of standing up to them. Thus, when he hears about Solomon's anointing, Adonijah runs for sanctuary,

leaving Solomon with the sole claim to the crown. Even in the biblical account, it should be noted, Solomon comes to power essentially via a coup.

The final speech of David's life, in 1 Kings 2, comes in two distinct parts. The first four verses are different in type from absolutely everything that we have seen so far in the David story. David's first words to Solomon on his deathbed are completely out of character: they are, rather, purely Deuteronomistic language: "Keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and following his laws, his commandments, his rules, and his admonitions as recorded in the Torah of Moses" (2:3). Nowhere has David elsewhere referred to the Torah of Moses; nowhere has he seemed particularly keen on following any divine laws, written or otherwise. These verses are an indisputably Deuteronomistic insertion into the story, preparing the reputation of David as the most righteous king, the one against whom, in the heavily Deuteronomistic book of Kings, all the rest of Israel's kings will be judged. The second part of David's speech is his instructions to Solomon regarding the various personalities left over from David's regime. Joab and Shimei are condemned to death; Barzillai the Gileadite is to be rewarded for his loyalty. It is difficult to read these instructions and not picture the movie *The Godfather*, with the new rising capo swearing to take care of his father's unfinished family business.

David's decline begins with the Bathsheba episode, where his power reaches its apex before, as it turns out, overreaching. From there on it is a slow weakening: the deaths of his sons, rebellions against his rule, both internal and external, and eventually his feeble death, confined to his bed.

Questions for reflection:

How might we understand the parallels between the stories of David's sons and the patriarchal narratives, especially the removal of the three eldest sons (of David and Jacob, respectively) in favor of the fourth (Solomon and Judah, respectively)?

How do David's sons, especially Absalom and Solomon, learn lessons in gaining power from their father?

How do these chapters contribute to the overall picture of David and his reign? What part do they play in the later traditions of David that view him as beloved and powerful?

Further reading:

McCarter, *II Samuel*, 314–518

McKenzie, *King David*, 161–89