

# **A LOOK AT A BOOK: 2 SAMUEL, Pt. 1**

## **August 25, 2013**

### **2 SAMUEL 1**

#### **THE QUESTION OF SAUL'S SUCCESSOR**

The canonical division of I and II Samuel is appropriately marked by the death of Saul. With the death of Saul, there is no king. There may have been a number of claimants for the throne, but priority must surely be given to the house of Saul, to his descendants, and to his strongest and most important ally, Abner. Thus the problem to which the literature must now address itself is the transfer of legitimacy. It must demonstrate that David is not only a proper candidate, but the legitimate successor to Saul. Second Samuel 1-4 addresses that problem, which must be handled with political delicacy and literary finesse.

#### **2 Samuel 1:1-16**

David remains in Ziklag (cf. I Samuel 30:26-31), still out of the way of the dangerous action, still completely unimplicated in the Saul debacle (30:1).

*II Samuel 1:1-10.* A messenger comes. He is a surprising figure, bedraggled, obviously a bearer of a great grief. His initial gesture is a deep bow. First he gives the summary report, the defeat of Israel, the death of Saul, the death of Jonathan (v. 4). Then he becomes more specific. David asks for details (v. 5). There is no reason for David to be suspicious of the report. Even though this turn of events provides David with his chance for the throne, it is difficult to imagine David, even at his most cynical, wanting a massive defeat of Israel in order to advance his own interests. We learn that the messenger is the king's killer (v. 10). He killed Saul, he asserts, because Saul was already mortally wounded. Our suspicions are not yet aroused by this killer-become-messenger. Finally, at the end of verse 10, we get a fuller picture of what has happened. It is at last clear that this killer-messenger is a cool customer – able to kill a king, strip a dead body, seize what is royal, and rush away to Ziklag to a waiting claimant of the throne. He brings to David the symbols of royal legitimacy, crown and bracelet. He imagines he is single-handedly making a king, a new king, and giving him legitimacy through the accouterments of royalty.

*II Samuel 1:1-16.* Now David must give answer to the killer-become-legitimator. The news of Saul's death cannot be unwelcome to David. Saul is dead, and David, happily, is not in any way implicated. This is a moment when a lesser person might have rejoiced and thanked the bearer of good tidings. David, however, is not a lesser person. David responds not in glee but in pathos, for the king is dead. David grieves, and all his company grieves with him (v. 11). They grieve for Saul, for Jonathan, for the people of Yahweh, for the house of Israel (v. 12). David has enough for which to grieve for a long time. In his grief, however, David is not remiss in his responsibility. He queries the

messenger once more. The messenger is waiting for a reward, foolishly imagining he has delivered the crown to David, thinking wrongly that David would gladly receive the throne from his hand. The messenger is an outsider. He cannot know that the crown is given only by God, not by a murdering stranger. David is presented as the one in the narrative who correctly discerns what is happening, which the other completely misunderstands. David's response to the messenger is firm, authoritative, decisive, and loyal to Saul (vv. 14-16). He immediately rebukes the outrageous behavior of the Amalekite who has violated "the Lord's anointed."

Chapter 1 contains a version of Saul's death that contradicts the one in I Samuel 31. Many scholars regard this version as a fabrication and regard I Samuel 31 as an authentic historical account. That is, the Amalekite is lying in order to ingratiate himself with David. On this reading, the Amalekite is simply a scavenger who happened upon the royal insignia and confiscated them. David executes the man on the basis of his own testimony. The narrative is perhaps not concerned with who killed Saul. It is rather preoccupied with David's faithful, magisterial response to Saul's death. David grieves and acts for the sake of Saul's honor.

## **II Samuel 1:17-27**

David's lament over Saul and Jonathan is powerful, passionate poetry commonly regarded as being directly from David's hand. This poem marks a deep, precious and hurtful moment in the life of Israel. David does not know what will come next. For the length of the song, at least, all the dangerous ambiguity of David's future is bracketed out. There is a moratorium on power for the full honoring of grief. Such poetry serves to give the community time, space, and means whereby to treasure and to relinquish. This poem is a useful model for public grief among us. We have nearly lost our capacity for such grief. We are characteristically so busy with power, so bent on continuity, so mesmerized by our ideologies of control that we will not entertain a hiatus in our control of life to allow for grief. Such grief does for a moment require a relinquishment of control. David does not hesitate to enact such relinquishment.

*II Samuel 1:25b-27.* It is now Jonathan – brother, ally, advocate, the one whom David loved as he loved himself – who is evoked. The words cannot say all that needs to be said. Jonathan's life is a cause of amazement, his love has been deeper and more precious than that of a wife. The words "pleasant and lovely" are repeated from verse 23. David is uninhibited about this friendship in which personal solidarity is not simply political usefulness. This poetry is the speech of one who knows utter loss and who finds powerful words to match the loss. The refrain recurs at the end of the poem (v. 27). The words of the poem are simultaneously intimate and public. The contemptible daughters of Philistia, the bereft mountain of Gilboa, the well-off maidens of Israel are all summoned to grief. At the end, however, the poet is left alone. The defeat is final, and life is closed.

## **2 SAMUEL 2-3**

### **THE QUESTION OF SAUL'S SUCCESSOR, Cont.**

*2:1-4a.* After David has properly and genuinely grieved the end of Saul, the narrative turns abruptly to the future. David has been discreet and reticent while Saul lived, but no more. There is a vacancy on the throne and David makes his move. He is on the way to power...and to Jerusalem.

One is struck with the abruptness of verse 1. Immediately after the funeral, David is prepared to act. He is still in his private refuge of Ziklag (1:1), but now it is safe to go back to the territory of Israel. He must return if he is to be a factor in the new settlements of power that are sure to come. At the outset, David's charge to power is shaped as an act of obedience. His first step is not recruitment, strategy, or public relations. It is to inquire of Yahweh (v. 1). David makes no move without Yahweh's guidance. Yahweh is immediately and positively responsive: "Go up. Go up to Hebron." Hebron is a centrally located city in the south where David has carried on his calculating, ingratiating raids. Hebron is the center of Judah and David's first seat of power. Hebron is among the cities that shared in David's rich booty (I Samuel 30:31).

In obedience to Yahweh, David goes to Hebron. He goes with a considerable company. His procession is a show of power and determination. We are given no clue to the negotiations that went on with the powers of Judah. We are given only the conclusion: The men of Judah "anointed David king." David is anointed a second time (cf. I Samuel 16:13). This time it is a public, popular, political act; there is no hint of religious sanction.

*2:8-32.* The powerful legacy of Saul is at work in the north in the person of Abner, Saul's military leader. Abner is the acknowledged strong man and kingmaker of the north. The "men of Judah" make David king. It was a popular act. By contrast, it is Abner who "made Ishbosheth king" (v. 9).

David is winning, but he has not yet won. The narrative knows he will win, but he will win at terrible cost. The killing is not yet finished and the new throne is by no means secure. Over all these events linger the unanswered death of Asahel.

This chapter provides no resolution to the north-south Abner-Joab conflict but only gives us a glimpse of the high stakes and the risks yet to be run.

### **2 Samuel 3:1-5**

David is on his way to power in Israel, as in Judah. The open-ended struggle for power does not preclude hints along the way about the outcome. David's eventual accession to power has already been acknowledged in I Samuel in the mouths of Jonathan (23:17), Saul (24:20), Abigail (25:28), and Saul again (26:25). In an understated but unambiguous way, verse 1 makes clear that God's providential intention for David may be delayed but cannot be defeated.

## **2 Samuel 3:6-21**

The overriding question for the narrator at this juncture is, How will David win the north, which is still loyal to Saul? We expect the principals in the conflict to be David and Ishbosheth, the legitimate but pitiful heir of Saul.

*3:12-16.* Abner is as good as his defiant word. He immediately enters into negotiations with David to explore terms of delivering the north to David. The action proceeds on the assumption that Ishbosheth is no factor at all. David appears ready to give Abner what he wants . . . with one condition. David wants Michal, daughter of Saul, whom he had won (I Samuel 18:20-28) and lost (I Samuel 24:44). Perhaps David sets the condition to test Abner's seriousness. For Abner to secure Michal requires boldness, not unlike his action with the concubine of Ishbosheth. Most likely David wants the return of Michal to gain legitimacy with the Saulide party. David has his way. Saul's daughter returns, and Ishbosheth is passively compliant.

*3:22-30.* Everything is settled between David, Abner, and Israel. A fourth actor, however, now enters the drama. It is Joab, son of Zeruiah (cf. 2:18). Joab is tough and hard, utterly loyal to David. Joab, however, is also jealous of his own role as chief of David's military men. Joab is back from a raid for spoil, apparently continuing David's earlier practice. Joab, however, does not want peace. He does not want Abner to be at peace. He wants his own triumph and the elimination of Abner as his rival. Joab wants the leader of the north destroyed, not welcomed as a partner. Joab is sure Abner has set David up to betray him (v. 25). Joab's protest is credible, if viewed through hawkish eyes. He fears Abner has gained too much and David has conceded too much.

## **2 SAMUEL 4-6**

### **THE QUESTION OF SAUL'S SUCCESSOR AND DAVID ESTABLISHED AS SUCCESSOR**

#### **2 Samuel 4:1-12**

As we have observed in the opening stories of II Samuel, in order for David to secure power in the north, some carefully placed killings must occur – Saul and Jonathan, Abner, and now, in this chapter, Ishbosheth. It is hard to imagine how David could have prevailed in the north without these deaths. The deaths of Saul, Abner, and Ishbosheth require the counter deaths of the Amalekite, Asahel, and the sons of Rimmon. Their deaths are necessary to the narrative management of bloodguilt and to the establishment of David's innocence. Though there are killings, and indeed must be killings in the early days of David's reign, David is innocent. David caused none of these deaths. David does not appreciate them or celebrate them.

*4:5-12.* The royal son of Saul is at rest. The guard is asleep. When the captors get into the bedroom of this facade of royal power, they do their violence with lust and abandonment. The narrative uses three verbs to characterize their action (v. 7). They strike, they kill, they decapitate (cf. I Samuel 17:46). Ishbosheth, pitiful creature bereft of Abner, is three times dead. His head is a trophy. The sons of Rimmon come to Hebron. They enter David's presence, proud, defiant, expecting commendation. They

give their bloody act a theological reading: “It is Yahweh who has avenged!” (v. 8). Because of their misreading, these two raiders have to die. Again, it takes three verbs to report their death: killed, cut off, hanged. They are exhibited for all to see. Their hanging bodies show how death begets death and how loyal is David as the sworn friend of Saul, Jonathan, Mephibosheth, and even Ishbosheth.

David knows, beyond a hint of public doubt, that it is Yahweh, only Yahweh, who redeems his life (v. 9). That strange, welcome redemption, however, takes place in and through the ambitious, miscalculating, bloody deeds of less discerning, less cunning people.

## **2 Samuel 5:11-6:23**

### **The Reign of David**

Israel has been waiting for the kingdom since I Samuel 8. David’s kingdom represented for Israel a reliable economic order, a secure military position, and a political legitimacy among the nations.

## **2 Samuel 6**

### **David Remembers the Ark**

How odd that David (and the narrator) should now suddenly remember the ark. The ark has been shelved for a long time, following its return from the Philistines (I Samuel 6:19-7:1). Indeed, Israel has not even thought of the ark since it was deposited in the house of Abinadab (I Samuel 7:1-2). After twenty years of dormancy, the ark is now recalled as a vehicle for royal legitimation. In a remarkably imaginative move, David appeals to Israel’s most precious ancient symbol, the ark.

*6:1-5.* The removal of the ark to Jerusalem happens in two stages, interrupted by a grave crisis.

*6:6-11.* The coming of the ark signified two things for the king. Looking back, it meant a reengagement with the taproot of Israel’s religious vitality. David here gets back in touch with the most elemental dimensions of Israel’s traditional faith; it is no wonder that the movement of the ark evoked such a stupendous celebration. Looking forward, the reclaiming of the ark is an opportunity for a powerful propagandistic effort to assert the new regime as the rightful successor to the old tribal arrangement.

*6:20-23.* The exchange between Michal and David is carefully crafted. She speaks sarcastically about “the king” (v. 20). Perhaps she suggests that because she is the daughter of a king, she knows how a king should act, in contrast to David, who acts unworthily. Michal speaks with authority, with an assumed voice of strength. Her speech concerns “honor” (glory), “the maids,” and “uncovering shamelessly.” David refutes her judgment by saying he may be contemptible in her eyes, but in the eyes of the maidens (and therefore of political opinion) he is more honored.

In the center of the exchange, David makes the claim that established his preeminence and dismisses Michal and the entire Saulide claim.

**2 SAMUEL 7  
A TEMPLE FOR YAHWEH**

**2 SAMUEL 9-11  
THE FAMILY OF DAVID**

II Samuel 9-20 and 1 Kings 1-2 is singularly concerned with the question, “Who should sit on the throne of my lord the king after him?” The attractiveness of David and his power for us in this literature is that he is like us and we are so like him. In watching David closely we learn something of our own hurts, hates, and hopes. We catch glimpses, moreover, of the shadowed way in which God is keeping the promises of chapter 7 through and in the midst of the pathos and sordidness of too much power coupled with too little self-doubt.