

Chapter One

2 Samuel 5.11–25

David Established as King

Introduction

‘Pride goes before a fall’ (Proverbs 16.18). In fact there is no particular stress in the text on any arrogance or complacency on David’s part as he becomes king. He is not obviously smug or haughty, conceited or self-important. Yet many ordinary Christians have found, as David was about to do, that when life is going swimmingly, it is all too easy to lose one’s spiritual bearings, one’s sense of vocation and of direction under God, so that a fall frequently follows.

The story of David’s *rise* ends triumphantly: ‘David became greater and greater, because the Lord, the God of Hosts was with him’ (5.10). The story of David’s *fall* opens in a series of scenes which consolidate the impression of David as a man with the Midas touch: politically, domestically and militarily everything he touches turns to gold. Politically (in scene one), a neighbouring kingdom seeks an alliance with him; domestically (in scene two), he acquires wives and concubines and produces sons in abundance; and militarily (in scenes four and five) his old foes the Philistines are routed – not once, but twice.

Nor is there any very obvious cloud on the horizon. For the attentive reader, however, there are subtle hints of what is to come – just the first indications that with power come new challenges, to which even the great David might not be equal.

Scene One (verses 11-12): David’s kingship is established

11 King Hiram of Tyre sent messengers to David, along with cedar trees, and carpenters and masons who built David a house. 12 David then perceived that the Lord had established him king over Israel, and that he had exalted his kingdom for the sake of his people Israel.

David's accession to the throne of Judah in 2.4 seems not to have precipitated much response among neighbouring kingdoms. When he assumes the throne of Israel, however, everything changes. Now he is a player on the international stage. As king of Judah, his role was of interest only to his rival, ruling over the northern tribes. As king of all Israel, David's position attracts the interest of both potential allies and traditional enemies.

First, a new alliance is established. King Hiram of Tyre, David's neighbour to the north, takes the initiative. His gifts are an overture, intended to indicate support for the new regime and to secure peace and co-operation for the future. But the gifts are also powerfully symbolic. He sends the resources to assist David in building a palace fit for a king – both the raw materials and the technical expertise.

The gift reflects a predictably worldly view of kingship on Hiram's part. 'Come', he seems to be saying to David, 'this is how we do sovereignty around here. You'll be needing a glorious palace. I'll help you'. Hiram's message expresses solidarity with David: 'Welcome to the club: we are colleagues and peers and our collaboration will be of mutual benefit'. The gifts hint not just at a wealth, but also at a potential for trade and prosperity beyond the wildest dreams of a shepherd boy.

And while David accepts the gifts, the reader is doubly heartened by David's response. In the generosity of Hiram, David perceives both that the Lord has graciously established him as king, and (in addition) that the Lord has done so and has exalted David's kingdom, 'for the sake of his people Israel'.

The story thus begins with a note about the purpose of kingship within the will of God. There will be a similar note towards the end of the story, in David's 'last words' (23.3-4). A godly king is to reign on behalf of his people, in their interests and for their welfare. David is only 'over Israel' for Israel. This is the way the Scriptures understand all leadership: those in authority are always called to exercise power for the common good and for the benefit of others. The principle is as hard to implement as it is easy to state. Experienced leaders will be all too aware how often their actions and priorities are shaped by their own needs (for approval from the 'right' people perhaps, or for success) rather than by the needs of their community.

There is a warning implied here. David's privilege carries responsibility. More than that, the transition from verse 11 to verse 12 may be subversive, inviting the reader to perceive with David that it is the Lord, not Hiram, who has established him as king and that it is on the Lord, and not Hiram, that David's continued security and prosperity depend. There may be an allusion here to Deuteronomy 17.14-20 – a 'role

specification' for Israel's king, and a recognition of the corrupting effects of power and wealth: those who have silver and gold in abundance, and cedar trees, risk trusting in these things. It has inevitably always been those most bereft of worldly resources who have found it most easy to trust in the Lord, and it has inevitably always been the wealthy who have found it most difficult to do so. How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven! (Matthew 19.23 and parallels).

Scene Two (verses 13-14): David's dynasty is established

13 In Jerusalem, after he came from Hebron, David took more concubines and wives; and more sons and daughters were born to David. 14 These are the names of those who were born to him in Jerusalem: Shammua, Shobab, Nathan, Solomon, 15 Ibhar, Elishua, Nepheg, Japhia, 16 Elishama, Eliada, and Eliphelet.

On the face of it, this second pair of verses further consolidates David's power and authority. Perhaps the Psalmist had David in mind when he wrote, 'sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord... like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth; happy [blessed] is the man who has his quiver full of them' (Psalm 127.3-5). In his personal life, as well as in public office (although for a king in Israel the two are difficult to distinguish), David is prospering.

This list corresponds to the brief account in 3.2-5, where a list was provided of the six sons who were born to David of six wives during the seven years he was king of Judah in Hebron. They include Amnon, Absalom and Adonijah, who will play such prominent roles in this story.

Here another eleven sons are named. The list is a summary, and includes offspring whose births lie in the future. Only one of these, Solomon, will reappear in the story. It is worth noting that, assuming the sons are listed in birth order, Solomon was only the tenth born son of his father. For all the prestige associated in the Bible with 'the firstborn', it is remarkable how often a family line by-passes this conventional route: neither Isaac nor Jacob, Joseph nor David himself were the oldest among their brothers. Divine blessing is always sheer gift in Scripture. It tends to confound human assumptions and expectations. In this story, the Hebron sons will prove ill-fated.

If there was an allusion to Deuteronomy 17 in the previous scene, it is less veiled here: Israel's king is expressly forbidden there

to ‘acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will be turned away’ (Deuteronomy 17.17). But David conforms to the conventional categories of kingship. He will have not just a palace fit for a king, but a harem fit for one also. As king of Judah, he acquired only wives. Now he has concubines too. Again, a faint alarm bell rings in the mind of the reader.

Scene Three (verses 17-21): David defeats the Philistines at Baal-perazim

17 When the Philistines heard that David had been anointed king over Israel, all the Philistines went up in search of David; but David heard about it and went down to the stronghold. 18 Now the Philistines had come and spread out in the valley of Rephaim. 19 David inquired of the Lord, ‘Shall I go up against the Philistines? Will you give them into my hand?’ The Lord said to David, ‘Go up; for I will certainly give the Philistines into your hand.’ 20 So David came to Baal-perazim, and David defeated them there. He said, ‘The Lord has burst forth against my enemies before me, like a bursting flood.’ Therefore that place is called Baal-perazim. 21 The Philistines abandoned their idols there, and David and his men carried them away.

When Hiram heard that David was king in Jerusalem, he sent messengers with peaceful intent, armed with gifts. When the Philistines heard it, they sent out a search party with hostile intent. When David hears of it, he takes refuge in ‘the stronghold’. That he ‘went down’ suggests that the stronghold in question was not Jerusalem. But the valley of Rephaim is not far from David’s new capital, so he didn’t go a long way.

The passage is full of echoes of an earlier stage in David’s life. These associations are all positive and contribute to the gathering impression of him as being at the pinnacle of his career. The narrative suggests it is many years since David has had contact with the Philistines (and certainly since he fought them). It is the first time since the death of Saul that they have attacked Israel. The renewed hostility may imply that David’s erstwhile ally Achish (whom David had not met since he was forced to leave the camp at Aphek on the eve of the battle on Mount Gilboa, 1 Samuel 29, 31) is dead, and there is a new king in Gath. It is likewise many years since David sought refuge in strongholds (1

Samuel 22.4; 23.14, 19, 29; 24.22); and it is many years since David is recorded as having enquired of the Lord (1 Samuel 22.10; 30.8; 2 Samuel 2.1; and especially 1 Samuel 23.2-4). As in those earlier instances, the reader is invited to note how readily David seeks the Lord's guidance and how readily the Lord gives it. As king-in-waiting, this was David's consistent pattern. The narrative stresses that nothing has changed in this respect now that he has become king. His hand is now mightier than ever, but David takes nothing for granted. He understands that if the Philistines are to be delivered into his hand, it will be because the Lord delivers them. So he acts only as he is authorised to act.

Sure enough, David defeats the Philistines. Something about the encounter (such as a sudden breaching of the enemy lines) presumably resembled an eruption or water-burst, because it gave the place the name Baal-perazim (which means something like, 'the Lord has burst forth'). The word *perez* (bursting) occurs four times in verse 20 (compare Isaiah 28.21).

The Philistines fled, leaving their idols behind. When David and his men captured these and carried them off it was like the settling of an ancient score: a full generation previously, in the final days of the prophet Samuel, the Philistines had defeated Israel in battle and had carried off the ark (1 Samuel 4.11). Here the tables are turned.

Scene Four (verses 22-25): David defeats the Philistines at Rephaim

22 Once again the Philistines came up, and were spread out in the valley of Rephaim. 23 When David inquired of the Lord, he said, 'You shall not go up; go round to their rear, and come upon them opposite the balsam trees. 24 When you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, then be on the alert; for then the Lord has gone out before you to strike down the army of the Philistines.' 25 David did just as the Lord had commanded him; and he struck down the Philistines from Geba all the way to Gezer.

There is considerable repetition in this final scene of what has just taken place. Again, the Philistines 'were spread out in the valley of Rephaim'. Again, David is quick to 'inquire of the Lord'; and again, the Lord is quick to respond. Again, David sensed the presence of the Lord in the decisive moment of the battle and again he won a great victory, 'from Geba all the way to Gezer'.

But a detail is different. In the earlier conflict, David had asked ‘Shall I go up?’ and was told, ‘Yes: go up’. Here he evidently asks the same question, but is told, ‘No: don’t go up – go round and attack them from behind’. There is a theological point at stake here. With the Living God, nothing is ever entirely predictable or routine. David’s reliance on the will of God does not lapse into presumption on the basis of past experience. Inquiring of the Lord is always new and must always be freshly attentive. Yesterday’s answer is not sufficient for today’s question. It is necessary to listen again for the Word of the Lord.

David is instructed first to circle around and to approach his enemies from the rear – opposite the balsam trees. He is then told to wait for a definite signal: ‘when you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, then be on the alert’. Presumably ‘the sound of marching’ in the treetops is a reference to the wind. The noise it makes in the balsam trees provides David with cover for an attack so that their advance is not heard. The sense of waiting for the Spirit of God, alert to the opportunities of the moment, is thoroughly familiar to most believers.

Conclusion

When the episode concludes ‘David did just as the Lord commanded him’, the comment seems appropriate not just to the final scene, but to all David’s early work as king of all Israel. He is cast here as the faithful and obedient servant of the Lord. He is so much in tune with his God that the text can state in one verse (verse 24) that ‘the Lord has gone out before [him] to strike down the army of the Philistines’ and in the next (verse 25) that ‘David struck down the Philistines’. God and David are in absolute concert.

This is the ideal to which Christians aspire: to discern so accurately what God is doing, and to join in so effectively, that our work is God’s work, and God’s work is ours. This is presumably what Jesus meant when he spoke of his ministry in these terms: ‘My Father is working and I also am working’. At this point in his life, David might justifiably claim something similar.