

The Righteous Sinner

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“The Lord has dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he has rewarded me. For I have kept the ways of the Lord; I have not done evil by turning from my God.”

2 Samuel 22:21-22 NIV

I. Introduction

Without a doubt, King David of Israel plays one of the most central roles in the Hebrew Bible, as Israel's second and greatest king, father of the messianic line. Only a shepherd boy at the time of his anointing by Samuel, David rises to rule the unified kingdom of Israel, the second and last man to do so. Although David commits numerous deadly sins of adultery, murder, and pride, to name a few, it is he who is promised an eternal dynasty, which both Jews and Christians understand as being fulfilled in the Messiah. That is, David, a member of God's chosen people, and, in fact, God's chosen individual, attempts to uphold the Law of Moses but fails repeatedly, yet God remains faithful to him. While God disciplines David as He has promised, He remains true to his promise in showing favor to David and his offspring. In this way, the narrative of David, which runs from 1 Samuel 16 through 1 Kings 2:10, forms a microcosm of the entire Hebrew Bible. This narrative makes up approximately a quarter of the Deuteronomistic History, the collection of Biblical books from Deuteronomy through 2 Kings.¹ David forms an example of the entire history of the people of Israel: struggling, yet unable to remain totally faithful, and thus disciplined but still chosen by God. Thus, although other issues are developed in the Deuteronomic History, such as the role of God in history and the formation of the monarchy, as the primary example of an Israelite king and a man chosen directly by God, David's reign itself develops these themes. Therefore, the ethical questions raised by the career and character of King David are in fact the primary theme of the Deuteronomistic History.

¹ The Deuteronomistic History (DH) is the term both for the texts of Deuteronomy through 2 Kings and for a collection of theories about their authorship. The primary conclusion of the DH theories is that Deuteronomy through 2 Kings was originally a single literary unit. Therefore, DH theories place the authorship of all of these texts later than the traditional dates of the fourteenth century BC and much closer to the exile in 587 BC. These theories also hold that the death notice of Moses was moved from an original position at the end of Numbers to its present location in Deuteronomy 34. The theory originated with Martin Noth in 1943. See "Deuteronomistic History." Anchor Bible Dictionary. Freedman, David Noel, et al, Eds. New York: Doubleday, 1992. Pp. 160-168.

II. The Davidic Narrative and the Record of David's Sins

As we have already seen, the Davidic narrative extends from 1 Samuel 16 to 1 Kings 2:10, from David's anointing by Samuel as the replacement for Saul to the time of his death, and can be divided into three sections. The first section, from 1 Samuel 16 to 2 Samuel 2:3, details David's life before he was anointed king; the second, 2 Samuel 2:4 to 5:2, details his reign as king of Judah; and the third, from 2 Samuel 5:3 to 1 Kings 2:10, his reign over all of Israel. These three divisions are marked by three anointings of David.² The first section consists primarily of David's exploits and escapes from Saul. The second section covers approximately seven and a half years,³ consisting primarily of a civil war and a series of murders within Israel. The third section, the longest portion of the story, details the activities of David's reign. It is this section which contains most of David's violations of Mosaic Law, specifically beginning in 2 Samuel 11. This section contains the details of several revolts, one of which leads to David's son Absalom actually taking the throne briefly and sleeping with David's concubines, as punishment for David's sins.⁴ Three main passages raise serious ethical questions in this narrative, one of which lies in the first section, while the other two lie in the third section.

The first major account of one of David's sins is in 1 Samuel 24, when David cuts a piece from Saul's robe. The sin David commits is that of lifting a hand against the LORD's anointed, Saul, a lesser example of the same crime for which David has a man killed in 2 Samuel 1. Indeed, David sees his own action as such a grave sin that he proclaims, "The LORD forbid that I should do such a thing to my master,"⁵ and risks his life to offer apology to Saul and seek peace.

² 1 Samuel 16:13, 2 Samuel 2:4, and 2 Samuel 5:3. Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references taken from Ryrie Study Bible: Expanded Edition, New International Version. Chicago: Moody Press, 1994.

³ 2 Samuel 2:11.

⁴ 2 Samuel 12:11, 16:22.

⁵ 2 Samuel 24:6.

Thus, although David sins, he immediately tries to remedy that situation and thus is not punished by God. J. P. Fokkelman notes that this is a kind of exploratory sin:

“Dealing with the holiness of the anointed is at this time a question of trial and error, and his palpitations [David’s feelings of guilt] show him that he has already come across the error. It is the same kind of signal that we receive when we stick our fingers into a faulty plug socket as we feel around in the dark. (It is no coincidence that the next story, Ch. 25, the next degree of violence, has a real heart attack on the part of Nabal.”⁶

Thus, although David does not intentionally sin in this way, his sin tests the boundaries and is not as blatant a show of hypocrisy as it might seem. Fokkelman also observes that the cutting of Saul’s cloak by David marks the complement of the tearing action in 1 Samuel 15:27, symbolic of the tearing away of the kingdom from Saul, and thus marks the completion of Saul’s rejection as king. At the same time, the anointed king is no longer set apart as clearly as before; the holiness of that office has been violated a first time, and all future anointed kings are subject to violations of their persons, as well. This seemingly simple act of bravado thus has profound implications for the entire monarchical system of Israel.

The second situation is far more serious; in 2 Samuel 11, David commits adultery by taking to bed Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Afraid of being found out, David attempts to make Uriah sleep with his wife while drunk and thereby convince him that Bathsheba’s pregnancy is his own doing. When this plan fails, David essentially resorts to murder, plotting to place Uriah in the thick of battle and abandon him there. Indeed, the prophet Nathan, speaking for God, says to David, “You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to

⁶ Fokkelman, J. P. Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel. Assen/Maastricht, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1986. v.2. 458.

be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.”⁷ That is, David essentially used the Ammonites as a weapon to kill Uriah, and is thus guilty of murder. This is used to explain the death of Bathsheba’s child in 2 Samuel 12 and Absalom’s revolt. Moreover, we have here “the darkest blot on the portrait of Israel’s most famous king.”⁸ In fact, we are told, “But the thing David had done displeased the LORD,”⁹ a type of phrase used throughout 1 and 2 Kings, and here applied to Israel’s most righteous king, marking a dark point in the story of the monarchy.

However, David is given the interesting information in 2 Samuel 12:13-14 that “The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt, the son born to you will die.”¹⁰ Thus, it is not for his crime itself, punishable by death, that David is punished, but for the effect it had of causing the LORD’s enemies to lose respect for Him.¹¹ This implies either that a different standard from the Mosaic Law applies to David, or that God is willing to forgive the sins of a repentant soul. Certainly, the latter is a theme found throughout the Hebrew Bible, but rarely without some form of punishment attached. The forgiveness of David for two capital crimes, adultery and murder, is quite remarkable. Thus, it seems, because David has been chosen by God and because of God’s promise to David that he would always have a man on the throne,¹² God is willing to make an exception to His own rule in this case. This is possible because it is God who is judge, jury, and executioner, rather than the Israelite people, because for the Israelites to condemn their king themselves would be unthinkable, since he is God’s anointed individual.

⁷ 2 Samuel 12:9, NIV.

⁸ Fokkelman, v. 1, 60.

⁹ 2 Samuel 11:27, NIV.

¹⁰ 2 Samuel 12:13-14, NIV.

¹¹ This is what is preserved in the Masoretic Text. An ancient Hebrew scribal tradition writes “But because by doing this you have shown utter contempt for the LORD.” *Ryrie Study Bible*, 469, NIV note on 2 Samuel 12:14.

¹² First stated in 2 Samuel 7:13, “[Your son] is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (NIV).

Thus, God, having promised to maintain the Davidic dynasty forever, chooses to spare David from his deserved punishment. The essential fact is that David is not intentionally evil, but repentant; in fact, this is why God establishes the Davidic covenant: because David seeks to please the LORD, despite his failings.

The third major sin of which David is accused falls late in his reign. In 2 Samuel 24:1, we are told, “Again the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, ‘Go and take a census of Israel and Judah.’”¹³ David indeed takes a census, and his sin lies in his lack of faith in God to protect Israel. Rather, he takes comfort in numbers and pride in the size of his army, instead of trusting God to protect his chosen people. As punishment, he is given three options: three years of famine, three months of pursuit by his enemies, or three days of plague. Relying on God’s mercy rather than men’s, David chooses the plague. Thus, the many are punished for one’s sin, as in the fall of Adam in Genesis 3. Thus, we see an important principle of the Deuteronomistic History: the king acts as God’s chosen one, the political intermediary between God and Israel, hence his actions represent God’s actions to the people and the people’s actions to God. Hence, if the king sins in his specific role as king, God reacts as though all Israel sinned in the same way. This story serves as a revelatory warning to the future kings of Israel: your sins have profound consequences, because you are not your own, but the servant of God. Unfortunately for Israel, few kings after Solomon seem to recognize this fact, sinning at will and plunging the monarchy and Israel as a whole into a cycle of divine punishment culminating in the Babylonian exile and the destruction of Jerusalem. This is the crux of much of the Deuteronomistic history; the pattern for monarchy and for God’s relation to his people is established by the actions of David the individual and David the king,

¹³ 2 Samuel 24:1, NIV.

foreshadowed in Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Judges, and simply repeats itself throughout the books of Kings. The ethical standard for the king is set through David's trial and error, and the evidence of God's interaction with the people is made clear and dramatic through the prophecies of Nathan and others and through the fulfillment of those prophecies, both for better and for worse.

III. His Righteousness Maintained

Despite all this, David maintains his innocence. He proclaims boldly, "The Lord has dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he has rewarded me. For I have kept the ways of the Lord; I have not done evil by turning from my God."¹⁴ Obviously, this is not literally true; murder, adultery, taking multiple and foreign wives, and pride are certainly condemned in the Law, so we must ask what this means. What we find is surprisingly simple: David seems to be unaware of his sins, or at least the magnitude thereof, at the time he commits them. Although at first this seems naïve to claim of David, it is not so remarkable given the context. As we discussed above, David felt guilt or palpitations only after cutting Saul's robe. The act itself seems at first glance to be a manifestation David's efforts to avoid sin; he was entirely within his power to slay Saul, his tormentor, and assume the throne of Israel, yet he knew such would be a sin. Thus, David avoids the larger temptation of murder for the time being, but yields to the temptation to have something to show for his efforts. Only afterwards does he realize, with Fokkelman's electric shock, that he has crossed the line into sin. Obviously, with Bathsheba, things are clearer. David certainly knew that he was sleeping with another man's wife, as he is informed of that fact in 2 Samuel 11:3, and that he was ordering

¹⁴ 2 Samuel 22:21-22, NIV.

killed a leader in his army. However, it appears that the true recognition of these crimes as adultery and murder, respectively, and hence as sin against God, does not enter David's mind, at least not concretely. In fact, God appears only in the last word of chapter 11, the Tetragram.¹⁵ In contrast, God is actively speaking through Nathan to David in chapter 12, and it is here that David recognizes his sin, saying, "I have sinned against the Lord."¹⁶ Likewise, David's census is a reasonable, if naïve mistake. It certainly seems reasonable to desire a census of the military in a warring nation. "David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the Lord, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, O Lord, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing.'"¹⁷ This is not to say that David never knowingly committed any sins, but rather that he attempted to avoid sin when possible and to repent when he did sin. Thus, he claims, he is righteous before God.

IV. Time and History Given Meaning

Finally, we begin to see a coherent picture in all of this. Obviously, throughout the Hebrew Bible, God is seen as sovereign over history and human affairs, but allows the details of Israel's affairs to be administered in lesser or greater amounts by human individuals. Thus, Genesis through 2 Kings detail a progression from God directly administering all human affairs to patriarchal rule, to the leadership of Moses, Aaron, and Joshua, to the rule of the judges, to the anointing of Saul and the beginnings of the monarchy. Thus, the so-called Deuteronomistic History, the books of Deuteronomy through 2 Kings, detail the last half of this progression from

¹⁵ The Hebrew ends UYUW WHWDP IYI UCD-BV} BPIU DBWY GP, "But evil was the thing which David did in the eyes of the LORD." *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. *Biblia Sacra Utriusque Testamenti Editio Hebraica et Graeca*. Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994.

¹⁶ 2 Samuel 12:13, NIV.

¹⁷ 2 Samuel 24:10, NIV.

a single mediator between God and Israel to a single temporary authoritative figure to a single permanent authoritative figure, a king. The development of the monarchy therefore constitutes one area of God's developing relationship to mankind, which, in turn, is made clearer and defined further by the career of David. The Davidic promise of an everlasting dynasty provides sharp relief to the variety of sins David and his future descendants commit. It is this covenant, a covenant of irrevocable love,¹⁸ which forms the basis for the survival of Israel in light of the sins of her kings. Without this promise which God upholds, it is doubtful that Israel's First Temple Period would have lasted as long as it did; the sins recounted in 1 and 2 Kings are simply too great. The author of Samuel, the man Noth and others call the Deuteronomist, thus uses the story of David as an example of how God relates to different people in different ways. Though David commits several sins punishable by death or expulsion from the Israelite community, he is not so punished, because he returns to God immediately after each sin. The Davidic narrative contains both a warning and a promise: God is in control of Israel and her king, and will punish her as she deserves, yet will have mercy on her if she struggles to remain faithful to Him. This sets the pattern for the monarchy and its pendulum of faithfulness and sinfulness and for God's interaction with the people through the so-called major prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. Thus, time is given concrete meaning: time is the medium in which God's relationship with mankind develops, and the events of time are controlled by Him through increasing human mediation.

[2546 words]

¹⁸ 2 Samuel 7:15.

VI. Bibliography

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