

THE DAVID STORY

*A TRANSLATION WITH COMMENTARY
OF 1 AND 2 SAMUEL*

ROBERT
ALTER

W · W · NORTON & COMPANY

NEW YORK LONDON

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Printed in the United States of America

First published as a Norton paperback 2000

The author gratefully acknowledges permission from Yehuda Amichai for use of the four-line poem that begins "When Samuel was born. . . ." (PATUAH SAGUR PATUAH, Tel Aviv, 1998, p. 34) on p. xv of the Introduction, translation by the author.

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The text of this book is composed in 11/14.5 and 10/12 Fairfield LH Light with the display set in Bodega Serif Light
Composition and manufacturing by the Haddon Craftsmen, Inc.
Book design by Margaret M. Wagner

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bible. O.T. Samuel. English. Alter. 1999.

The David story : a translation with commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel / Robert Alter.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-393-04803-9

1. Bible. O.T. Samuel—Commentaries. I. Alter, Robert.

II. Title.

BS1323.A48 1999

222'.4077—dc21

99-21116

CIP

ISBN 0-393-32077-4 pbk.

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110

www.wwnorton.com

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd.

Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT

12 13 14 15

say to My servant, to David, Thus says the LORD of Hosts: I Myself took you from the pasture, from following the flocks, to be prince over My people, over Israel. And I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut down your enemies before you. And I will make you a great name, like the name of the great of the earth. And I will set aside a place for My people, for Israel, and plant them, and they shall abide there and no longer quake, and the wicked shall no more afflict them as before, from the day that I appointed judges over My people Israel. And I will grant you respite from all your enemies, and the LORD declares that it is He Who will make you a house. When your days are full and you lie with your fathers, I will raise up your seed after you, who will issue from your loins, and I will make his kingship unshaken. He it is who will build a house for My name and I will make the throne of his kingship unshaken forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me, so should he do wrong, I will chastise him with the rod men use and with the afflictions of humankind. But My loyalty shall not swerve from him as I made it swerve from Saul whom I removed from before you. And your house and your kingship shall be steadfast

10.-11. *no more afflict them as before, from the day I appointed judges.* Though the judges succeeded in temporarily driving off Israel's sundry oppressors, the period as a whole was one of instability and recurrent harrassment by enemy peoples.

11. *it is He Who will make you a house.* Both in this prophecy and in David's prayer the double meaning of "house" is repeatedly exploited. God will grant David a house—that is, a continuing dynasty, and then will have David's son build Him a house—that is, a temple. The house in which David dwells in the opening verse of this chapter is of course his palace in Jerusalem.

14. *the rod men use . . . the afflictions of humankind.* God will discipline the future king as a father disciplines his son, and with familiar human tribulations, not with supernatural bolts from the heavens.

15. *my loyalty.* The Hebrew *hesed* is the faithfulness and goodwill that one party of a pact owes to the other.

whom I removed. The Hebrew uses the same verb that is rendered here in the immediately preceding phrase as "made it swerve."

- 17 forever, your throne unshaken forever.' " In accordance with all these words and in accordance with all this vision, so did Nathan speak to David.
- 18 And King David came and sat before the LORD and said, "Who am I, LORD God, and what is my house, that you have brought me this far?
- 19 And even this is too little in Your eyes, LORD God, for You have also spoken of Your servant's house in distant time, and this is a man's
- 20 instruction, LORD God. And how can David speak more to You, when
- 21 You know Your servant, LORD God? For the sake of Your word, and according to Your heart You have done all these great things, to make
- 22 known to Your servant. Therefore are You great, O LORD God, for there is none like You and there is no god beside You, in all we have heard
- 23 with our own ears. And who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation

18. *David came and sat before the LORD.* David comes into the tent in which the Ark has been placed. The verb "sat," *yashav*, is identical with the verb at the beginning of the chapter that also means "dwell," and thus establishes a structural parallel between the passage on the postponed building of the temple and David's prayer.

19. *You have also spoken of Your servant's house in a distant time.* These words refer directly to the prophecy conveyed to Nathan in verses 12–16, and thus undermine the claim of some scholars that David's prayer was originally part of the story of the introduction of the Ark to Jerusalem (Chapter 6), from which it was supposedly separated by the insertion of Nathan's prophecy.

this is a man's instruction. That is, he would scarcely think himself worthy of all this divine bounty about which God has just instructed him. But this is no more than an interpretive guess, for the meaning of the Hebrew—*zot torat ha'adam*—is obscure.

22. *Therefore are You great, O LORD God.* . . . Although the thread of piety in David's complex and contradictory character could be perfectly authentic, he does not elsewhere speak in this elevated, liturgical, celebratory style, and so the inference of the presence of another writer in this passage might be plausible. Yet it is at least conceivable that the writer has introduced this celebratory rhetoric to punctuate David's moment of respite in the story.

CHAPTER 11

And it happened at the turn of the year, at the time the kings sally forth, that David sent out Joab and his servants with him and all Israel, and

Chapters 11 and 12, the story of David and Bathsheba and its immediate aftermath, are the great turning point of the whole David story, as both Sternberg and Polzin have duly observed; and it seems as though the writer has pulled out all the stops of his remarkable narrative art in order to achieve a brilliant realization of this crucially pivotal episode. The deployment of thematic key words, the shifting play of dialogue, the intricate relation between instructions and their execution, the cultivated ambiguities of motive, are orchestrated with a richness that scarcely has an equal in ancient narrative. Though the analytic scholars have variously sought to break up these chapters into editorial frame and Succession Narrative, Prophetic composition and old source, emending patches of the text as they proceed, such efforts are best passed over in silence, for the powerful literary integrity of the text speaks for itself.

1. *at the turn of the year.* The most plausible meaning is the beginning of the spring, when the end of the heavy winter rains makes military action feasible.

at the time when the kings sally forth. There is a cunning ambiguity here in the Hebrew text. The received consonantal text reads *mal'akhim*, "messengers," though many manuscripts show *melakhim*, "kings." As Polzin observes, the verb "to sally forth" (or, in nonmilitary contexts, "to go forth") is often attached to kings and never to messengers, so "kings" is definitely the more likely reading, though the ghost of "messengers" shows through in the letters of the text. Polzin beautifully describes this double take: "the verse clearly doubles back on itself in a marvelous display of narrative virtuosity: at a time when kings go forth, David did not, making it a time, therefore, when messengers must go forth; at a time when messengers go forth, David, remaining in Jerusalem, sent Joab, his servants and all Israel to ravage Ammon."

David sent out Joab. The verb "to send"—the right verb for "messengers"—occurs eleven times in this chapter, framing the beginning and the end. This episode is not a moral parable but a story anchored in the realities of political history. It is concerned with the institutionalization of the monarchy. David,

they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. And David was sitting in Jerusalem.

- 2 And it happened at eventide that David arose from his bed and walked about on the roof of the king's house, and he saw from
- 3 the roof a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful. And David sent and inquired after the woman, and the one he sent said, "Why, this is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam wife of Uriah the Hittite."

now a sedentary king removed from the field of action and endowed with a dangerous amount of leisure, is seen constantly operating through the agency of others, sending messengers within Jerusalem and out to Ammonite territory. Working through intermediaries, as the story will abundantly show, creates a whole new order of complications and unanticipated consequences.

And David was sitting in Jerusalem. The verb for "sitting" also means "to stay" (compare verse 12), but it is best to preserve the literal sense here because of the pointed sequence: sitting, lying, rising, and because in biblical usage "to sit" is also an antonym of "to go out" (or sally forth).

2. *at eventide.* The Hebrew term, *bet 'erev*, echoes ironically with the phrase *bet ts'et*, "at the time of sallying forth" in the previous verse. A siesta on a hot spring day would begin not long after noon, so this recumbent king has been in bed an inordinately long time.

he saw from the roof. The palace is situated on a height, so David can look down on the naked Bathsheba bathing, presumably on her own rooftop. This situation of the palace also explains why David tells Uriah to "go down" to his house. Later in the story, archers deal destruction from the heights of the city wall, the Hebrew using the same preposition, *me'al*, to convey the sense of "from above."

3. *the one he sent said.* The Hebrew uses an unspecified "he said."

Bathsheba daughter of Eliam wife of Uriah the Hittite. It is unusual to identify a woman by both father and husband. The reason may be, as Bar-Efrat suggests, that both men are members of David's elite corps of warriors. Although Uriah's designation as Hittite has led some interpreters to think of him as a foreign mercenary, the fact that he has a pious Israelite name ("the LORD is my light") suggests that he is rather a native or at least a naturalized Israelite of Hittite extraction. In any case, there is obvious irony in the fact that the man of foreign origins is the perfect Good Soldier of Israel, whereas the Israelite king betrays and murders him.

And David sent messengers and fetched her and she came to him and
 he lay with her, she having just cleansed herself of her impurity, and
 she returned to her house. And the woman became pregnant and sent
 and told David and said, "I am pregnant." And David sent to Joab:
 "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah the Hittite to David.

And Uriah came to him, and David asked how Joab fared and how the
 troops fared and how the fighting fared. And David said to Uriah, "Go
 down to your house and bathe your feet." And Uriah went out from the

4. *David sent . . . and fetched her and she came to him and he lay with her.* It is not uncommon for biblical narrative to use a chain of verbs in this fashion to indicate rapid, single-minded action. What is unusual is that one verb in the middle of this sequence switches grammatical subject—from David to Bathsheba. When the verb "come to" or "come into" has a masculine subject and "into" is followed by a feminine object, it designates a first act of sexual intercourse. One wonders whether the writer is boldly toying with this double meaning, intimating an element of active participation by Bathsheba in David's sexual summons. The text is otherwise entirely silent on her feelings, giving the impression that she is passive as others act on her. But her later behavior in the matter of her son's succession to the throne (1 Kings 1–2) suggests a woman who has her eye on the main chance, and it is possible that opportunism, not merely passive submission, explains her behavior here as well. In all of this, David's sending messengers first to ask about Bathsheba and then to call her to his bed means that the adultery can scarcely be a secret within the court.

cleansed herself of her impurity. The reference is to the ritually required bath after the end of menstruation. This explains Bathsheba's bathing on the roof and also makes it clear that she could not be pregnant by her husband.

5. *I am pregnant.* Astonishingly, these are the only words Bathsheba speaks in this story. In keeping with the stringent efficiency of biblical narrative, the story leaps forward from the sexual act to the discovery of pregnancy.

8. *Go down to your house and bathe your feet.* Some interpreters have made this more heavy handed than it is by construing the final phrase as a euphemism for sex (because "feet" in the Bible is occasionally a euphemism for the male genitals). But in the biblical world, bathing the feet is something travelers regularly do when they come from the dusty road. This bathing of the feet stands in a kind of synecdochic relation to Bathsheba's bathing of her whole body, discreetly suggesting that after the bathing of the feet other refreshments of the body will ensue.

9 king's house and the king's provisions came out after him. And Uriah
lay at the entrance to the king's house with all the servants of his mas-
10 ter, and he went not down to his house. And they told David, saying,
"Uriah did not go down to his house." And David said to Uriah, "Look,
you have come from a journey. Why have you not gone down to your
11 house?" And Uriah said to David, "The Ark and Israel and Judah are
sitting in huts, and my master Joab and my master's servants are
encamped in the open field, and shall I then come to my house to eat
and to drink and to lie with my wife? By your life, by your very life, I

the king's provisions. David has not explicitly mentioned food or wine, but he sends a kind of catered dinner after Uriah, hoping that the feast with Bathsheba will get husband and wife into the desired amorous mood.

9. *And Uriah lay at the entrance of the king's house.* The verb "to lie," according to David's expectations, should have been followed by "with his wife." Instead, we have not sex but a soldier's sleeping with his comrades, who are guarding the king. It should be remembered (compare 1 Samuel:21) that soldiers in combat generally practiced sexual abstinence.

11. *sitting in huts.* Some construe *sukot*, "huts," as a place-name, the city of Succoth a little east of the Jordan. But if the Ark is sent out of Jerusalem to the front, it would make no sense to detain it at a logistics center only halfway to the battlefield, and Uriah's point is that neither the Ark nor the troops enjoy proper shelter (while David is "sitting in Jerusalem").

shall I then come to my house to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? Uriah now spells out all that David left unsaid when he urged him to go down to his house. The crucial detail of sleeping with Bathsheba comes at the very end. Menakhem Perry and Meir Sternberg, in a pioneering Hebrew article in 1968 (revised by Sternberg for his English book of 1985), raised the provocative issue of deliberate ambiguity (comparing the strategy of this story with the two mutually exclusive readings possible for Henry James's short story "The Turn of the Screw"). In their view, there are two equally viable readings. If Uriah does *not* know that David has cuckolded him, he is the instrument of dramatic irony—the perfect soldier vis-à-vis the treacherous king who is desperately trying to manipulate him so that the husband will unwittingly cover the traces of his wife's sexual betrayal. If Uriah *does* know of the adultery, he is a rather different character—not naive but shrewdly aware, playing a dangerous game of hints in which he deliberately pricks the conscience of the king, cognizant, and perhaps not caring, that his own life may soon be forfeit. More

will not do this thing." And David said to Uriah, "Stay here today as
well, and tomorrow I shall send you off." And Uriah stayed in
Jerusalem that day and the next. And David called him, and he ate
before him and drank, and David made him drunk. And he went out in
the evening to lie in the place where he lay with the servants of his
master, but to his house he did not go down. And it happened in the
morning that David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of
Uriah. And he wrote in the letter, saying, "Put Uriah in the face of the
fiercest battling and draw back, so that he will be struck down and die."

recently, Moshe Garsiel has proposed a reconciliation of these two readings: when Uriah first arrives from the front, he is unaware of what has occurred; after the first night with his comrades at the palace gate, he has been duly informed of the sexual betrayal, so that in his second dialogue with the king, he cultivates a rhetoric of implicit accusation. Garsiel observes that when Uriah swears emphatically by David's life (verse 11), he does not add the deferential "my lord the king."

13. *David called him.* The verb here has the idiomatic sense of "invite."
he ate before him. The preposition is an indication of hierarchical distance between subject and king.
David made him drunk. "David" has been added for clarity. The Hebrew says only "he made him drunk." Plying Uriah with wine is a last desperate attempt, and a rather crude one, to get him to have sex with his wife.

14. *sent it by the hand of Uriah.* The letter would be in the form of a small scroll with either a seal or threads around it. David is counting on the fact that Uriah as a loyal soldier will not dream of opening the letter. If he does not know of the adultery, he has in any case no personal motive to look at the letter. If he does know, he is accepting his fate with grim resignation, bitterly conscious that his wife has betrayed him and that the king is too powerful for him to contend with.

15. *so that he will be struck down and die.* With no possibility of making Uriah seem responsible for Bathsheba's pregnancy, David now gravely compounds the original crime of adultery by plotting to get Uriah out of the way entirely by having him killed. What follows in the story makes it clear that bloodshed, far more than adultery, is David's indelible transgression.

16 And it happened, as Joab was keeping watch on the city, that he placed
 17 Uriah in the place where he knew there were valiant men. And the
 men of the city sallied forth and did battle with Joab, and some of the
 troops, some of David's servants, fell, and Uriah the Hittite also died.
 18, 19 And Joab sent and told David all the details of the battle. And Joab
 charged the messenger, saying, "When you finish reporting all the
 20 details of the battle to the king, if it should happen that the king's
 wrath is roused and he says to you, 'Why did you approach the city to
 21 fight? Did you not know they would shoot from the wall? Who struck
 down Abimelech son of Jerubbesheth? Did not a woman fling down on
 him an upper millstone from the wall, and he died in Thebez? Why did
 you approach the wall?' Then shall you say, 'Your servant Uriah the Hit-

17. *some of the troops . . . fell, and Uriah the Hittite also died.* As Perry and Sternberg have keenly observed, one of the salient features of this story is the repeated alteration of instructions by those who carry them out. It is, indeed, a vivid demonstration of the ambiguous effecting of ends through the agency of others which is one of the great political themes of the story. The canny Joab immediately sees that David's orders are impossibly clumsy (perhaps an indication that the Machiavellian David has suddenly lost his manipulative coolness): if the men around Uriah were to draw back all at once, leaving him alone exposed, it would be entirely transparent that there was a plot to get him killed. Joab, then, coldly recognizes that in order to give David's plan some credibility, it will be necessary to send a whole contingent into a dangerous place and for many others beside Uriah to die. In this fashion, the circle of lethal consequences of David's initial act spreads wider and wider.

21. *Did not a woman fling down on him an upper millstone . . . ?* The specificity of the prospective dialogue that Joab invents for a wrathful David may at first seem surprising. The story of the ignominious death of Abimelech at the hand of a woman (Judges 9: 52-54) may have become a kind of object lesson in siege strategy for professional soldiers—when you are laying siege against a city, above all beware of coming too close to the wall. One suspects also that Joab's emphasis on a woman's dealing death to the warrior—Abimelech had asked his armor bearer to run him through so that it would *not* be said he was killed by a woman!—points back to Bathsheba as the ultimate source of this chain of disasters. (This would be Joab's soldierly judgment, not necessarily the author's.)

tite also died.' " And the messenger went and came and told David all 22
that Joab had sent him for. And the messenger said to David, "The men 23
overpowered us and sallied forth against us into the field, and then we
were upon them back to the entrance of the gate. And they shot at your 24
servants from the wall, and some of the king's servants died, and your
servant Uriah the Hittite also died." And the king said to the messen- 25
ger, "Thus shall you say to Joab, 'Let this thing not seem evil in your
eyes, for the sword devours sometimes one way and sometimes

Your servant Uriah the Hittite also died. Joab obviously knows that this is the message for which David is waiting. By placing it in the anticipatory "script" that he dictates to the messenger, he is of course giving away the secret, more or less, to the messenger. Might this, too, be calculated, as an oblique dissemination of David's complicity in Uriah's death, perhaps to be used at some future point by Joab against the king? In any case, given David's track record in killing messengers who bear tidings not to his liking, Joab may want to be sure that this messenger has the means to fend off any violent reaction from the king, who would not have been expecting a report of many casualties.

23. *and then we were upon them back to the entrance of the gate.* The astute messenger offers a circumstantial account that justifies the mistake of approaching too close to the wall: the Ammonites came out after the Israelites in hot pursuit; then the Israelites, turning the tide of battle, were drawn after the fleeing Ammonites and so were tricked into coming right up to the gates of the city.

24. *and your servant Uriah the Hittite also died.* The messenger has divined the real point of Joab's instructions all too well. He realizes that what David above all wants to hear is the news of Uriah's death, and rather than risk the whole outburst, indicated by the prospective dialogue invented by Joab with the reference to the woman who killed Abimelech, the messenger hastens to conclude his report, before the king can react, by mentioning Uriah's death. Thus the narrative makes palpable the inexorable public knowledge of David's crime.

25. *the sword devours sometimes one way and sometimes another.* The king responds by directing to Joab what sounds like an old soldier's cliché (on the order of "every bullet has its billet"). These vapid words of consolation to the field commander are an implicit admission that Joab's revision of David's orders was necessary: David concedes that many a good man had to die in order to cover up his murder by proxy of Uriah.

another. Battle all the more fiercely against the city and destroy it.' And so rouse his spirits."

- 26 And Uriah's wife heard that Uriah her man was dead, and she keened
27 over her husband. And when the mourning was over, David sent and gathered her into his house and she became his wife. And she bore him a son, and the thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of the LORD.

battle all the more fiercely. The Hebrew is literally "make fierce [or, strengthen] your battle." The phrase is an emphatic formal echo of "the fiercest battling" in verse 15.

and so rouse his spirits. Literally, "and strengthen him," that is, Joab. Some read this as part of the message to Joab, construing it as "strengthen it [i.e., the battle]," though the verb has a masculine pronominal object and the word for battle is feminine.

27. *when the mourning was over.* Normally, the mourning period would be seven days. Bathsheba, then, is even more precipitous than Gertrude after the death of Hamlet the elder in hastening to the bed of a new husband. She does, of course, want to become David's wife before her big belly shows.

David sent and gathered her into his house and she became his wife. Throughout this story, David is never seen anywhere but in his house. This sentence at the end strongly echoes verse 4: "David sent . . . and fetched her and she came to him and he lay with her."

the thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of the LORD. Only now, after the adultery, the murder, the remarriage, and the birth of the son, does the narrator make an explicit moral judgment of David's actions. The invocation of God's judgment is the introduction to the appearance of Nathan the prophet, delivering first a moral parable "wherein to catch the conscience of the king" and then God's grim curse on David and his house.

CHAPTER 12

And the LORD sent Nathan to David, and he came to him and said to him: "Two men there were in a single town, one was rich and the other

1. *And the LORD sent.* The second stage of the story of David and Bathsheba—the phase of accusation and retribution—begins with a virtual pun on a prominent thematic word of the first half of the story. David was seen repeatedly "sending" messengers, arranging for the satisfaction of his lust and the murder of his mistress's husband through the agency of others. By contrast, God here "sends" his prophet to David—not an act of bureaucratic manipulation but the use of a human vehicle to convey a divine message of conscience.

Two men there were . . . Nathan's parable, from its very first syllables, makes clear its own status as a traditional tale and a poetic construction. The way one begins a storyteller's tale in the Bible is with the formula "there was a man"—compare the beginning of Job, or the beginning of the story of Hannah and Elkanah in 1 Samuel 1. The Hebrew prose of the parable also is set off strongly from the language of the surrounding narrative by its emphatically rhythmic character, with a fondness for parallel pairs of terms—an effect this translation tries to reproduce. The vocabulary, moreover, includes several terms that are relatively rare in biblical prose narrative: *kivśah* (ewe), *raśśh* (poor), *helekh* (wayfarer), *śoreah* (traveler). Finally the two "men" of the opening formula are at the end separated out into "rich man," "poor man," and "the man who had come" (in each of these cases, Hebrew *śish* is used). This formal repetition prepares the way, almost musically, for Nathan's two-word accusatory explosion, *śatah haśśish*, "You are the man!" Given the patently literary character of Nathan's tale, which would have been transparent to anyone native to ancient Hebrew culture, it is a little puzzling that David should so precipitously take the tale as a report of fact requiring judicial action. Nathan may be counting on the possibility that the obverse side of guilty conscience in a man like David is the anxious desire to do the right thing. As king, his first obligation is to protect his subjects and to dispense justice, especially to the disadvantaged. In the affair of Bathsheba and Uriah, he has done precisely the opposite. Now, as he listens to Nathan's tale, David's compensatory zeal to be a champion of justice overrides any awareness he might have of the evident artifice of the story.

- 2 poor. The rich man had sheep and cattle, in great abundance. And the
3 poor man had nothing save one little ewe that he had bought. And he
nurtured her and raised her with him together with his sons. From his
crust she would eat and from his cup she would drink and in his lap
4 she would lie, and she was to him like a daughter. And a wayfarer came
to the rich man, and it seemed a pity to him to take from his own sheep
and cattle to prepare for the traveler who had come to him, and he
took the poor man's ewe and prepared it for the man who had come to
5 him." And David's anger flared hot against the man, and he said to
Nathan, "As the LORD lives, doomed is the man who has done this!

3. *eat . . . drink . . . lie.* As Polzin observes, these terms effect full contact with the story of David and Bathsheba, being the three activities David sought to engage Uriah in with his wife (compare Uriah's words in 11:11). The parable begins to become a little fantastic here in the interest of drawing close to the relationships of conjugal intimacy and adultery to which it refers: the little lamb eats from her master's crust, drinks from his cup, and lies in his lap ("lap" as a biblical idiom has connotations not merely of parental sheltering but also of sexual intimacy: compare verse 8, "I gave . . . your master's wives in your lap").

4. *it seemed a pity to him.* The Hebrew uses an active verb, "he pitied," preparing for a literal ironic reversal in verse 6, "he had no pity"—or, "he did not pity." *to prepare.* The Hebrew is literally "to do" or "to make." When the verb has as its direct object a live edible animal, it means to slaughter and cook.

5. *David's anger flared hot against the man.* Nathan's rhetorical trap has now snapped shut. David, by his access of anger, condemns himself, and he is now the helpless target of the denunciation that Nathan will unleash.

Doomed is the man. Actually, according to biblical law someone who has illegally taken another's property would be subject to fourfold restitution (verse 6), not to the death penalty. (The Hebrew phrase is literally "son of death"—that is, deserving death, just as in 1 Samuel 26:16.) David pronounces this death sentence in his outburst of moral indignation, but it also reflects the way that the parable conflates the sexual "taking" of Bathsheba with the murder of Uriah: the addition of Bathsheba to the royal harem could have been intimated simply by the rich man's placing the ewe in his flock, but as the parable is told, the ewe must be slaughtered, blood must be shed. David himself will not be condemned to die, but death will hang over his house. As the Talmud (Yoma 22B) notes, the fourfold retribution for Uriah's death will be worked out in the death or violent fate of four of David's children: the unnamed infant son of Bathsheba, Tamar, Amnon, and Absalom.

And the poor man's ewe he shall pay back fourfold, in as much as he
 has done this thing, and because he had no pity!" And Nathan said to
 David, "You are the man! Thus says the LORD God of Israel: 'It is I who
 anointed you king over Israel and it is I Who saved you from the hand
 of Saul. And I gave you your master's house and your master's wives in
 your lap, and I gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if that be
 too little, I would give you even as much again. Why did you despise
 the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in His eyes? Uriah the Hittite
 you struck down with the sword, and his wife you took for yourself as
 wife, and him you have killed by the sword of the Ammonites! And so
 now, the sword shall not swerve from your house evermore, seeing you

7. *Thus says the LORD God of Israel.* After the direct knife thrust of "You are the man!", Nathan hastens to produce the prophetic messenger formula in its extended form, in this way proclaiming divine authorization for the dire imprecation he pronounces against David and his house.

7.-8. *It is I who anointed you. . . . And if that be too little, I would give you even as much again.* In the first part of this speech, there are several ironic echoes of David's prayer in Chapter 7, in which David thanks God for all His benefactions and professes himself unworthy of them.

8. *and your master's wives in your lap.* At least in the account passed down to us, there is no mention elsewhere of David's having taken sexual possession of his predecessor's consorts, though this was a practice useful for its symbolic force in a transfer of power, as Absalom will later realize.

9. *Uriah the Hittite you struck down with the sword.* The obliquity of working through agents at a distance, as David did in contriving the murder of Uriah, is exploded by the brutal directness of the language: it is as though David himself had wielded the sword. Only at the end of the sentence are we given the explanatory qualification "by the sword of the Ammonites."

10. *the sword shall not swerve from your house evermore.* As Bar-Efrat notes, David's rather callous message to Joab, "the sword sometimes consumes one way and sometimes another," is now thrown back in his face. The story of David's sons, not to speak of his descendants in later generations, will in fact turn out to be a long tale of conspiracy, internecine struggle, and murder. One of the most extraordinary features of the whole David narrative is that this story of the founding of the great dynasty of Judah is, paradoxically, already a tale of the fall of the house of David. Once again, no one has grasped this

- have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be
11 your wife.' Thus says the LORD, 'I am about to raise up evil against you
from your own house, and I will take your wives before your eyes and
give them to your fellowman, and he shall lie with your wives in the
12 sight of this sun. For you did it in secret but I will do this thing before
13 all Israel and before the sun.'" And David said to Nathan, "I have
offended against the LORD." And Nathan said to David, "The LORD has
14 also remitted your offense—you shall not die. But since you surely
spurned the LORD in this thing, the son born to you is doomed to die."
- 15 And Nathan went to his house, and the LORD afflicted the child whom
Bathsheba wife of Uriah the Hittite had born David, and he fell gravely
16 ill. And David implored God for the sake of the lad, and David fasted,

tragic paradox more profoundly than William Faulkner in his recasting of the story in *Absalom, Absalom!* The author of the David story continually exercises an unblinking vision of David and the institution of the monarchy that exposes their terrible flaws even as he accepts their divinely authorized legitimacy.

11. *I am about to raise up evil against you from your own house.* As befits a predictive curse, the agents of the evil are left unnamed. The disaster announced is clearly the rebellion of Absalom—as the reference to public cohabitation with David's wives makes clear—and the rape of Tamar and the murder of Amnon that lead up to it. But further "evil" from the house of David will persist to his deathbed, as Absalom's rebellion is followed by Adonijah's usurpation.

12. *For you did it in secret but I will do this thing before all Israel.* The calamitous misjudgments that defined David's dealings with Bathsheba and Uriah were a chain of bungled efforts at concealment. Now, in the retribution, all his crimes are to be revealed.

14. *spurned the LORD.* The Masoretic Text has "spurned the enemies of the LORD," a scribal euphemism to avoid making God the object of a harsh negative verb.

15. *Bathsheba wife of Uriah the Hittite.* At this point, she is still identified as wife of the husband she betrayed in conceiving this child.

and he came and spent the night lying on the ground. And the elders of
his house rose over him to rouse him up from the ground, but he would
not, nor did he partake of food with them. And it happened on the sev-
enth day that the child died, and David's servants were afraid to tell
him that the child was dead, for they said, "Look, while the child was
alive, we spoke to him and he did not heed our voice, and how can
we say to him, the child is dead? He will do some harm." And David
saw that his servants were whispering to each other and David under-
stood that the child was dead. And David said to his servants, "Is the
child dead?" And they said, "He is dead." And David rose from the
ground and bathed and rubbed himself with oil and changed his gar-
ments and came into the house of the LORD and worshiped and came
back to his house and asked that food be set out for him, and he ate.

17. *fasted . . . and spent the night lying on the ground.* David's acts pointedly replicate those of the man he murdered, who refused to go home and eat but instead spent the night lying on the ground with the palace guard.

18. *on the seventh day.* Seven days were the customary period of mourning. In this instance, David enacts a regimen of mourning, in an effort to placate God, before the fact of death.

He will do some harm. Presumably, the courtiers fear that David will do harm to himself in a frenzy of grief.

19. *He is dead.* In Hebrew, this is a single syllable, *met* "dead"—a response corresponding to idiomatic usage because there is no word for "yes" in biblical Hebrew, and so the person questioned must respond by affirming the key term of the question. It should be noted, however, that the writer has contrived to repeat "dead" five times, together with one use of the verb "died," in these two verses: the ineluctable bleak fact of death is hammered home to us, just before David's grim acceptance of it.

20. *David rose . . . bathed . . . rubbed himself with oil . . . changed his garments . . . worshiped . . . ate.* This uninterrupted chain of verbs signifies David's brisk resumption of the activities of normal life, evidently without speech and certainly without explanation, as the courtiers' puzzlement makes clear. The entire episode powerfully manifests that human capacity for surprise, and for paradoxical behavior, that is one of the hallmarks of the great biblical characters. David here acts in a way that neither his courtiers nor the audience of the story could have anticipated.

- 21 And his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done?
For the sake of the living child you fasted and wept, and when the
22 child was dead, you arose and ate food?" And he said, "While the child
was still alive I fasted and wept, for I thought, 'Who knows, the LORD
23 may favor me and the child will live.' And now that he is dead, why
should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I am going to him and he
will not come back to me."
- 24 And David consoled Bathsheba his wife, and he came to her and lay
with her, and she bore a son and called his name Solomon, and the

23. *Can I bring him back again? I am going to him and he will not come back to me.* If the episode of Bathsheba and Uriah is the great turning point of the David story, these haunting words are the pivotal moment in the turning point. As we have repeatedly seen, every instance of David's speech in the preceding narrative has been crafted to serve political ends, much of it evincing elaborately artful rhetoric. Now, after the dire curse pronounced by Nathan, the first stage of which is fulfilled in the death of the child, David speaks for the first time not out of political need but in his existential nakedness. The words he utters have a stark simplicity—there are no elegies now—and his recognition of the irreversibility of his son's death also makes him think of his own mortality. In place of David the seeker and wielder of power, we now see a vulnerable David, and this is how he will chiefly appear through the last half of his story.

24. *David consoled Bathsheba his wife.* Now, after the terrible price of the child's life has been paid for the murder of her husband, the narrator refers to her as David's wife, not Uriah's. A specific lapse of time is not mentioned, but one must assume that at least two or three months have passed, during which she recovers from the first childbirth.

she . . . called his name Solomon, and the LORD loved him. As a rule, it was the mother who exercised the privilege of naming the child. Despite some scholarly efforts to construe the name differently, its most plausible etymology remains the one that links it with the word for "peace" (the Hebrew term *Shelomoh* might simply mean "His peace"). The LORD's loving Solomon, who will disappear from the narrative until the struggle for the throne in 1 Kings 1, foreshadows his eventual destiny, and also harmonizes this name giving with the child's second name, Jedidiah, which means "God's friend."

LORD loved him. And He sent by the hand of Nathan the prophet and
called his name Jedidiah, by the grace of the LORD. 25

And Joab battled against Rabbah of the Ammonites and he captured 26
the royal city. And Joab sent messengers to David and said, 27

“I have battled against Rabbah,
Yes, I captured the Citadel of Waters.

And so now, assemble the rest of the troops and encamp against the 28
city and capture it, lest it be I who capture the city and my name be

25. *Jedidiah, by the grace of the LORD.* For the last phrase, this translation adopts a proposal by Kyle McCarter, Jr. The usual meaning of the preposition used, *ba'avur*, is “for the sake of.” It remains something of a puzzlement that the child should be given two names, one by his mother and the other by God through His prophet. One common suggestion is that Jedidiah was Solomon’s official throne name. But perhaps the second name, indicating special access to divine favor, reflects a political calculation on the part of Nathan: he is already aligning himself with Solomon (and with Bathsheba), figuring that in the long run it will be best to have a successor to David under some obligation to him. In the event, Nathan’s intervention will prove crucial in securing the throne for Solomon.

26. *Joab battled against Rabbah.* It is possible, as many scholars have claimed, that the conquest of Rabbah, in the siege of which Uriah had perished, in fact occurs before the birth of Solomon, though sieges lasting two or more years were not unknown in the ancient world.

27. *I have battled against Rabbah.* . . . Joab is actually sending David a double message. As dutiful field commander, he urges David (verse 28) to hasten to the front so that the conquest of the Ammonite capital will be attributed to him. And yet, he proclaims the conquest in the triumphal formality of a little victory poem (one line, two parallel versets) in which it is he who figures unambiguously as conqueror. This coy and dangerous game Joab plays with David about who has the real power will persist in the story.

the Citadel of Waters. The reference is not entirely clear, but the narrative context indicates that Joab has occupied one vital part of the city—evidently, where the water supply is—while the rest of the town has not yet been taken.

29 called upon it." And David assembled all the troops and went to Rab-
30 bah and battled against it and captured it. And he took the crown of
their king from his head, and its weight was a talent of gold, with pre-
cious stones, and it was set on David's head. And the booty of the city
31 he brought out in great abundance. And the people that were in it, he
brought out and set them to work with saws and iron threshing boards
and iron axes, and he put them to the brick mold. Thus did he do to all
the Ammonite towns. And David, and all the troops with him, returned
to Jerusalem.

30. *the crown of their king*. The Septuagint reads "Milcom" (the Ammonite deity) instead of *malkam*, "their king."

31. *set them to work with saws and iron threshing boards and iron axes* . . . The meaning of this entire sentence is a little uncertain, but the most plausible reading is that David impressed the male Ammonites into corvée labor. Some have suggested that the Ammonites were forced to tear down the walls of their own cities with the cutting tools listed in the catalogue here, though the reference to the brick mold at the end indicates some sort of construction, not just demolition.

CHAPTER 18

And David marshalled the troops that were with him and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. And David sent out the troops—a third under Joab and a third under Abishai son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, and a third under Ittai the Gittite. And the king said to the troops, "I, too, will surely sally forth with you." And the troops said, "You shall not sally forth. For if we must flee, they will pay us no mind, and should half of us die, they will pay us no mind, for you are like ten thousand of us, and so it is better that you be a help for us from the town." And the king said to them, "Whatever is good in your eyes I shall do." And the king stood by the gate and all the troops sallied

2. *I, too, will surely sally forth with you.* The aging David, as we have had occasion to note (see comment on 11:1), has long been a sedentary monarch rather than a field commander. In the present crisis, he imagines he can rise again to his old role, but the troops, who diplomatically make no reference to age or infirmity, clearly recognize he is not up to it.

3. *should half of us die, they will pay us no mind.* Like Ahitophel, the troops assume that the real object of Absalom's attack is David. But they essentially propose an opposite scenario to Absalom's: David will remain safe inside the fortified town, well behind the lines, while the troops—not panicked, as Ahitophel would have had it, but strategically deployed—will do battle against Absalom's army.

for you are like ten thousand of us. This is the reading of numerous Hebrew manuscripts and the Septuagint and Vulgate. The Masoretic Text reads "for now we are like ten thousand."

4. *the king stood by the gate.* Fokkelman has noted a wry correspondence here with the beginning of Absalom's usurpation, when he took a stance by the gate of the city and accosted each man who came by in order to enlist him to his cause.

5 forth by their hundreds and their thousands. And the king charged
Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, "Deal gently for me with the lad
Absalom." And all the troops heard when the king charged the com-
6 manders concerning Absalom. And the troops sallied forth to the field
7 to meet Israel, and the battle took place in the forest of Ephraim. And
the troops of Israel were routed there by David's servants, and great
8 was the slaughter there, twenty thousand. And the battle spread out
over all the countryside, and the forest devoured more of the troops
9 than the sword devoured on that day. And Absalom chanced to be in
front of David's servants, Absalom riding on his mule, and the mule
came under the tangled branches of a great terebinth, and his head
caught in the terebinth, and he dangled between heaven and earth,

5. *Deal gently*. This is the time-honored and eloquent rendering of the King James Version. But some philologists derive the rare verb here from a root that means "to cover" and hence construe it in context as "protect." This construction would make it a closer synonym of the verb used in the soldier's repetition of David's injunction in verse 12, "watch over."

7. *the troops of Israel were routed there*. The elision of the precise details of the battle is entirely consistent with the narrative treatment of battles elsewhere in the Bible. One may assume that the three divisions of seasoned fighters, led by their experienced commanders, attacked the Israelite army from three different sides, panicking it into disorderly flight—an outcome indicated in the "devouring" forest, where presumably the fleeing soldiers lost their way, stumbled, became entangled in the undergrowth, perhaps even slashed at each other in the dark of the wood. Throughout this episode, Absalom's forces are "Israel" and David's are his "servants." The former are numerically superior, but they behave like a poorly organized conscript army facing professional soldiers.

9. *his head caught in the terebinth, and he dangled between heaven and earth, while the mule which was beneath him passed on*. This striking and bizarre image of Absalom's penultimate moment provides a brilliant symbolic summation of his story. Most obviously, the head of hair that was his narcissistic glory is now the instrument of his fatal entrapment, Absalom the commander microcosmically enacting the fate of his army "devoured" by the forest. There is nothing supernatural here—David's forces have shrewdly taken advantage of the irregular terrain—yet there is a sense that nature is conspiring against Absalom and his men. The mule is in this period the usual mount for princes and kings (one should recall that all the king's sons ride away on their mules

while the mule which was beneath him passed on. And a certain man 10
saw and informed Joab and said, "Look, I saw Absalom dangling from
the terebinth." And Joab said to the man informing him, "And look, you 11
saw, and why did you not strike him to the ground there, and I would
have had to give you ten pieces of silver and a belt?" And the man said 12
to Joab, "Even were I to heft in my palms a thousand pieces of silver, I
would not reach out my hand against the king's son, for within our
hearing the king charged you and Abishai and Ittai, saying, 'Watch for

after Absalom has Amnon killed), so Absalom's losing his mule from under him is an image of his losing his royal seat. Having climbed from exile and rejection to the throne, he now dangles helplessly between sky and earth. The mule's "passing on" (*avar*), as Polzin notes, picks up the key verb ("cross over") that has characterized David's flight from the royal city. Fokkelman brilliantly shows that there is also a whole series of contrastive parallels between Absalom's fate and that of his counselor Ahitophel: "The counsellor rides calmly on his ass to his home while the prince is abandoned by his mule, a fatal loss. He is thrown into an unknown, nameless and ignominious grave while Ahitophel is 'buried in his father's grave'. . . . With all these contrasts, they have one detail in common: both finally hang."

he dangled. The Masoretic Text has "he was given," but ancient translations into Aramaic, Syriac, Greek, and Latin, now confirmed by the Qumran Samuel scroll, read "dangled," a difference of a single consonant in the Hebrew.

11. *And look, you saw.* The contemptuous Joab throws the soldier's own words back into his face: if that's what you really saw, why didn't you have the brains to finish him off on the spot and get the reward I would have given you? Joab, in his unflinching resolution to kill Absalom in defiance of David's explicit orders to the contrary, remains the consummately calculating political man—something David once was but no longer is. When Joab thought it was politically prudent to reconcile David with Absalom, he took elaborate steps to achieve that end. Now he realizes that an Absalom allowed to survive is likely to be a source of future political dissension and that the only sure way to eliminate this threat is Absalom's death.

12. *Were I to heft in my palms a thousand pieces of silver.* The soldier responds to Joab's contempt with righteous indignation, multiplying the hypothetical reward a hundredfold and turning the general act of giving silver into a concrete hefting of its weight in order to express how sacred he holds the king's injunction, which, we now see, has in fact been heard by "all the troops" (verse 5).

13 me over the lad Absalom.' Otherwise, I would have wrought falsely
with my own life, and nothing can be concealed from the king, while
14 you would have stood aloof." And Joab said, "Not so will I wait for you!"
And he took three sticks in his palm and he thrust them into Absalom's
15 heart, still alive in the heart of the terebinth. And ten lads, Joab's armor
bearers, pulled round and struck down Absalom and put him to death.
16 And Joab sounded the ram's horn, and the troops came back from pur-
suing Israel, for Joab held back the troops. And they took Absalom and
17 flung him into the big hollow in the forest, and they heaped up over it a
very big mound of stones. And all Israel had fled, each to his tent.

14. *he took three sticks in his palm.* Over against the soldier's palms hyperbolically hefting a thousand pieces of silver, Joab's palm grasps a blunt instrument of violence. The Hebrew *shevatim* means "sticks," not "darts," as it is often translated, and had they been darts, the blow would surely have been fatal. On the contrary, it seems probable that Joab's intention is not to kill the prince—after all, this military man is an experienced killer—but rather to stun him and hurt him badly, and then to spread the responsibility for the death by ordering the warriors to finish him off. Fokkelman proposes that the three sticks jibe with the three divisions of the army, so that Joab performs a deliberately symbolic act, "executing the rebellious prince on behalf of the whole army."

into Absalom's heart, still alive in the heart of the terebinth. The two hearts, one a vulnerable human organ, the other the dense center of the tangle of branches, produce an unsettling effect.

15. *lads.* The Hebrew *ne'arim*, "lads," in its sense of elite fighting men, rings dissonantly against David's repeated paternal designation of Absalom as *na'ar*, "lad."

16. *sounded.* The Hebrew reflects an untranslatable pun because the verb *taq'a*, "to make a piercing sound with a horn," also means to thrust or stab, and is the word just used to report Joab's blow to the heart.

17. *the big hollow.* An alternative rendering is "pit," but "hollow" is used here to preserve the verbal identity in the Hebrew between this moment and Hushai's imaginary description in Chapter 17 of David's hiding in "one of the hollows." To be flung into a hole in the field and covered with a heap of stones is a shameful burial.

And Absalom had taken and heaped up a cairn for himself in his life- 18
time, which is in the Valley of the King, for he said, "I have no son to
make my name remembered." And he called the cairn after his name,
and it is called Absalom's Monument to this day.

And Ahimaaz son of Zadok had said, "Let me run, pray, and bear tid- 19
ings to the king that the LORD has done him justice against his
enemies." And Joab said to him, "You are no man of tidings this 20
day. You may bear tidings on another day, but this day you shall
bear no tidings, for the king's son is dead." And Joab said to the 21
Cushite, "Go, inform the king of what you have seen," and the
Cushite bowed down before Joab and ran off. And Ahimaaz son of 22
Zadok once again said to Joab, "Whatever may be, let me, too, pray,
run after the Cushite." And Joab said, "Why should you run, my son,

18. *Absalom had . . . heaped up a cairn.* This brief notice, in the pluperfect tense, draws a pointed contrast with Absalom's ignominious grave. The same verb, "to heap up," is used for both, and the cairn, or commemorative pile of stones (*not* a "pillar") is the grandiose image that is transformed into the pile of stones over Absalom's body.

I have no son to make my name remembered. Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, with reference to both its David figure and its Absalom figure, beautifully catches the pathos of these words. Those who have sought to harmonize this verse with 14:27, where Absalom is said to have fathered three sons, propose that the sons died, their early death explaining why they are left unnamed.

21. *The Cushite.* This Nubian or Ethiopian is the third foreign messenger introduced into the story (the other two are the Egyptian slave who informs David of the whereabouts of the Amalekite raiding party and the Amalekite who reports Saul's death to David). Joab appears to exhibit a certain paternal concern for Ahimaaz, a priest and a faithful agent of David's during the insurrection—in the next verse he addresses him as "my son." Joab is keenly aware that David has in the past shown himself capable of killing the bearer of ill tidings in a fit of rage, and so the commander prefers to let a foreigner take the risk.

- 23 when yours are not welcome tidings?" "Whatever may be, I will run!"
And he said to him, "Run." And Ahimaaz ran by the way of the Plain,
and he overtook the Cushite.
- 24 And David was sitting between the gates, and the lookout went up on
the roof of the gate on the wall, and he raised his eyes and saw and,
25 look, a man was running alone. And the lookout called and told the
king, and the king said, "If he's alone, there are tidings in his mouth."

22. *yours are not welcome tidings*. The Hebrew—literally, "finding tidings"—is anomalous, and has inspired both emendation and excessively ingenious interpretation. The immediate context suggests "welcome" as the most plausible meaning, and this could easily be an idiom for which there are no other occurrences in the biblical corpus, which, after all, provides only a small sampling of ancient Hebrew usage. In fact, these two words, *besorah mots'eit*, could well be an idiomatic ellipsis for *besorah mots'eit hen*, "tidings finding favor (in his eyes)."

23. *by the way of the Plain*. The Plain in question is the Jordan Valley on the east side of the river. Some have suggested that Ahimaaz overtakes the Cushite not by speed but by running along a flatter, if less direct, route in the Jordan Valley riverbed, but verses 25–27 indicate that Ahimaaz outruns the Cushite.

24. *David was sitting between the gates*. Walled cities in ancient Israel and environs often had double walls, with an inner and outer gate and a small plaza between them. Moshe Garsiel neatly observes that David's ambivalence about the armed struggle is spatially figured by his physical location: he wanted to sally forth with the army; the troops wanted him within the city; he stations himself in between. Before the battle he stood by the gate; now he is seated by the gate, awaiting the news from the front—as Polzin notes, exactly like Eli, who is told of the death of his two sons.

the lookout went up on the roof of the gate . . . and he raised his eyes and saw. This moment is quite exceptional, and striking, in representing the arrival of the two messengers visually, from the perspective of the lookout on the wall reporting to David down below in the gate plaza. David's troubles with all his sons, it should be remembered, began when he himself looked down from a roof and saw a woman bathing.

25. *If he's alone, there are tidings in his mouth*. A solitary runner is likely to be a courier. Soldiers, whether in retreat or maneuvering, would travel in groups.

And he came on, drawing nearer. And the lookout saw another man running, and the lookout called to the gatekeeper and said, "Look, a man is running alone." And the king said, "This one, too, bears tidings." And the lookout said, "I see the running of the first one as the running of Ahimaaz son of Zadok," and the king said, "He is a good man and with good tidings he must come." And Ahimaaz called out and said to the king, "All is well." And he bowed down to the king, his face to the ground, and he said, "Blessed is the LORD your God Who has delivered over the men who raised their hand against my lord the king." And the king said, "Is it well with the lad Absalom?" And Ahimaaz said, "I saw a great crowd to send the king's servant Joab, and your servant, and I know not what . . ." And the king said, "Turn aside, stand by!" And he

27. *He is a good man, and with good tidings he must come.* This obvious non sequitur suggests that the desperately anxious David is grasping at straws. In fact, as revelatory dialogue, it shows us just how desperate he feels.

28. *All is well.* This is one word in the Hebrew, *shalom*. That word is the last two syllables of Absalom's name in Hebrew, *'Avshalom*, a link David will reinforce when he nervously asks, "Is it well [*shalom*] with the lad Absalom [*'Avshalom*]?"

Who has delivered over the men who raised their hands against my lord the king. Ahimaaz hastens to report, in terms that express both his Israelite piety and his loyalty to the king, the general defeat of the usurper's army. He of course says nothing of Absalom's fate.

29. *Is it well with the lad Absalom?* This seems to be David's overriding concern, not the military victory. Again and again, he insists on the term of affection, "lad," for the rebel son who would have killed him. The tension between his political role, which, as Joab understood, requires Absalom's destruction, and his paternal role, is painfully palpable. In this connection, it is noteworthy that David, so much the emotionally vulnerable father here, is consistently referred to as "the king," not as "David."

I saw a great crowd to send the king's servant. This is nearly gibberish but not because of any corruption of the text. Ahimaaz has been posed a question he does not dare answer, and so he begins to talk nervously and incoherently ("and I know not what . . .").

30. *Turn aside, stand by!* David, realizing he is unlikely to extract anything from the babbling Ahimaaz, decides to wait and interrogate the second messenger, whose arrival is imminent.

- 31 turned aside and took his place. And, look, the Cushite had come and the Cushite said, "Let my lord the king receive the tidings that the LORD
32 has done you justice against all who rose against you." And the king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the lad Absalom?" And the Cushite said, "May the enemies of my lord the king be like the lad, and all who have risen against you for evil!"

31. *Let my lord the king receive the tidings . . .* The Cushite is considerably more brusque than his predecessor. He does not begin with a reassuring "All is well." There is no indication of his bowing down before the king. He proceeds quickly to the report of the victory, and though the language of that report approximately parallels Ahimaaz's language, it is briefer, and ends with "against you" instead of the more deferential "against my lord the king."

32. *May the enemies of my lord the king be like the lad.* The Cushite promptly and clearly responds by reporting Absalom's death, though even he has enough sense to phrase it indirectly, neither mentioning Absalom by name nor using the word "died." In referring to the usurper as "the lad," he is quoting David, but without having picked up the crucial cue of David's paternal feelings reflected in the word. He blithely assumes that because Absalom was at the head of "all who have risen against" the king, the news of his death will be welcome. It strikes exactly the right note that the Cushite's very last word is "evil" (or, "harm").

CHAPTER 19

And the king was shaken. And he went up to the upper room over
the gate and he wept, and thus he said as he went, "My son,
Absalom! My son, my son, Absalom! Would that I had died in
your stead! Absalom, my son, my son!" And it was told to Joab, "Look,
the king is weeping and he is grieving over Absalom." And the victory
on that day turned into mourning for all the troops, for the troops
had heard on that day, saying, "The king is pained over his son."

1. *My son, my son, Absalom!* Much of the way experience transforms David in the course of his story can be seen through his changing responses to the deaths of those close to him. When Jonathan and Saul died, he intoned an eloquent elegy. When Abner was murdered, he declaimed a much briefer elegy, coupled with a speech dissociating himself from the killing. When his infant son by Bathsheba died, he spoke somber words about his own mortality and the irreversibility of death. Now, the eloquent David is reduced to a sheer stammer of grief, repeating over and over the two Hebrew words, *beni Avshalom*, "my son, Absalom." Although the narrator continues to refer to David only as "the king," in the shifting conflict between his public and private roles the latter here takes over entirely: Absalom is not the usurper who drove him from the throne but only "my son," and David is the anguished father who would rather have died, that his son might have lived.

3. *for the troops had heard on that day.* Before the battle they had all heard David's admonition to his commanders to do no harm to Absalom. Now they hear of his grief and are smitten with shame and apprehension—whether out of empathy for their beloved leader, or guilt over the complicity some of their number share in Absalom's death, or fear of potential violence between David and Joab.

- 4 And the troops stole away on that day to come to the city as troops disgraced in their flight from the battle would steal away. And the king covered his face, and the king cried out with a loud voice, "My son, Absalom! Absalom, my son, my son!" And Joab came to the king within the house and said, "You have today shamed all your servants who have saved your life today and the lives of your sons and daughters and the lives of your wives and the lives of your concubines, to love those who hate you and to hate those who love you. For you have said today that you have no commanders or servants. For I know today that were Absa-

4. *the troops stole away . . . as troops disgraced in their flight from battle.* This striking image of victory transformed into the bitterness of defeat picks up verbal threads, as Moshe Garsiel has perceptively noted, from the beginning of Absalom's insurrection (Chapter 15). There, the usurper stood at the gate, as David is here made to go out and sit in the gate. Absalom was said to "steal the heart" of the men of Israel as here the men steal away, and in order to recover dominion David is enjoined to speak to their heart (verse 8). The disheartened slipping away of the troops suggests that Joab is addressing an imminent danger of the disintegration of the army.

5. *the king covered his face.* The gesture makes perfect psychological sense, while the verb used, *la'at*, is the same one David chose when he said "Deal gently [*le'at*] with the lad Absalom."

6. *within the house.* The implication is that Joab speaks with David in private. The thematic opposition to this term is "in the gate," where Joab will send David.

You have today shamed all your servants who have saved your life today. Again and again here Joab insists on the word "today." It is this very moment, he suggests, this crucial turning point, that you must seize in order to reestablish your reign. You cannot allow yourself to think of the past, of your history as Absalom's father: as king, you must confront *today*, with its challenge and its political responsibilities.

7. *to love those who hate you and to hate those who love you.* Joab uses rhetorical exaggeration in order to elevate David's paternal attachment to Absalom into a generalized, perverse political principle: if you show such extravagant fondness for the usurper who sought your life, then you are behaving as though all your enemies were your friends and your friends your enemies.

For you have said today that you have no commanders and servants. That is, by exhibiting such love for your archenemy, you are showing flagrant disregard for the loyal officers and followers to whose devotion you owe your life.

lom alive and all of us today dead, then would it have been right in your eyes! And now, rise, go out, and speak to the heart of your servants. For by the LORD I have sworn, if you go not out, that not a man shall spend the night with you, and this will be a greater evil for you than any evil that has befallen you from your youth until now." And the king arose and sat in the gate, and to all the troops they told, saying, "Look, the king is sitting in the gate." And all the troops came before the king, while Israel had fled each man to his tent.

And all the people were deliberating throughout the tribes of Israel, saying, "The king rescued us from the clutches of our enemies and he

8. *Speak to the heart of your servants.* This personal act of rallying the men is deemed urgently necessary by Joab because the army has already begun to disperse ("steal away").

if you go not out . . . not a man will spend the night with you. These words are a naked threat: if David does not follow Joab's order, the commander will encourage the army to abandon the king, and he will be alone, without power or troops, engulfed in "a greater evil" than any that has befallen him in his long and arduous career. In all this, Joab's verbal assault on David, however motivated by pressing considerations of practical politics, is also a defense of his own flouting of David's injunction to protect Absalom. David at this point knows only the bare fact of his son's death, not who was responsible for it. This is something that he will inevitably soon learn, and that bitter knowledge is surely registered in his decision to replace Joab with Amasa (verse 14).

9. *the king arose and sat in the gate.* Fokkelman brilliantly observes the disparity between Joab's exhortation and the report of David's action. Joab had said, "go out, and speak to the heart of your servants." Instead of these active gestures, we see David passively sitting in the gate while the troops come to him, and we are given no reported speech for him. In Fokkelman's reading, this gap between command and act "call[s] up the image of a man beaten to a pulp, who can barely stand, and does only the minimum requested or expected of him."

10. *deliberating.* The verb *nadon* in this verse is conventionally related to the noun *madon*, "quarrel" or "contention." But in fact what the people say is not contentious, and it is preferable to derive the passive (perhaps implicitly reflexive) verbal form here from *dun*, to judge, consider, or deliberate.

CHAPTER 1

And King David had grown old, advanced in years, and they covered him with bedclothes, but he was not warm. And his servants said to him, Let them seek out for my lord the king a young virgin, that she may wait upon the king and become his familiar, and lie in your lap, and my

1. *And King David had grown old.* Although an editor, several centuries after the composition of the story, placed this episode and the next one at the beginning of the Book of Kings, and after the coda of 2 Samuel 21–24, because of the centrality in them of Solomon's succession, they are clearly the conclusion to the David story and bear all the hallmarks of its author's distinctive literary genius. There are strong stylistic links with the previous David narrative; the artful deployment of dialogue and of spatial shifts is very similar; and there are significant connections of phrasing, motif, and theme.

they covered him with bedclothes, but he was not warm. This extraordinary portrait of a human life working itself out in the gradual passage of time, which began with an agile, daring, and charismatic young David, now shows him in the extreme infirmity of old age, shivering in bed beneath his covers.

2. *Let them seek out for my lord the king a young virgin.* The language used by the courtiers recalls that of the mentally troubled Saul's courtiers, "Let them seek out a man skilled in playing the lyre" (1 Samuel 16:16)—the very words that were the prelude to the young David's entrance into the court.

became his familiar. The exact meaning of the Hebrew noun *sokhenet* is uncertain. Some translate it as "attendant" on the basis of the context. The verbal stem from which the word is derived generally has the meaning of "to become accustomed," hence the choice here of "familiar"—of course, in the social sense and not in the secondary sense linked with witchcraft. The only other occurrence of this term in the biblical corpus, Isaiah 22:15, seems to designate a (male) court official.

and lie in your lap. Nathan in his denunciatory parable addressed to David represented the ewe, symbolic of Bathsheba, lying in the poor man's lap (2 Samuel 12:3).

3 lord the king will be warm." And they sought out a beautiful young
woman through all the territory of Israel, and they found Abishag the
4 Shunamite and brought her to the king. And the young woman was
very beautiful, and she became a familiar to the king and ministered to
him, but the king knew her not.

5 And Adonijah son of Haggith was giving himself airs, saying, "I shall be
king!" And he made himself a chariot and horsemen with fifty men run-
6 ning before him. And his father never caused him pain, saying, "Why
have you done thus?" And he, too, was very goodly of appearance, and
7 him she had born after Absalom. And he parlayed with Joab son of
Zeruiah and with Abiathar the priest, and they lent their support to

4. *the young woman was very beautiful . . . but the king knew her not.* David, lying in bed with this desirable virgin, but now beyond any thought or capacity of sexual consummation, is of course a sad image of infirm old age. At the same time, this vignette of geriatric impotence is a pointed reversal of the Bathsheba story that brought down God's curse on the house of David, triggering all the subsequent troubles of dynastic succession. There, too, David was lying in his bed or couch (*mishkav*, as in verse 47 here), and there, too, he sent out emissaries to bring back a beautiful young woman to lie with him, though to antithetical purposes.

5. *was giving himself airs.* The reflexive verb has a root that means to raise up (hence the King James Version, "exalting himself"). Since a common noun derived from that verb, *nas'i*, means "prince," the reflexive verb might even have the sense of "acting the part of a prince."

he made himself a chariot and horsemen with fifty men running before him. These acts of regal presumption are the same ones carried out by the usurper Absalom, Adonijah's older brother.

6. *his father never caused him pain.* The obvious sense of the verb in context is "reprimand." The Septuagint reads "restrained him" (*atsaro* instead of *atsavo*), either because the Greek translators had a better Hebrew version here or were smoothing out the Hebrew.

And he, too, was very goodly of appearance. As the second clause of this sentence makes clear, the "too" refers to Absalom, the son Haggith bore David before Adonijah.