

CHAPTER 5

*David's Kingdom*

THE MYTH OF NATIONAL AND  
RELIGIOUS ORIGINS

TO BE REMEMBERED AS A glorious king, one must have reigned over a glorious kingdom. In Israel's cultural memory, no kingdom was more glorious than the united Israel and Judah under David. This was an easy period to glorify—not only was it the only time when the northern and southern kingdoms were ruled by a single monarch, but it lasted for only two generations, under David and then Solomon, before disintegrating. The best times are always those of the irrecoverable past, largely because that past can be re-shaped in our memory, made finer than it ever really was or could have been.

David is credited with the creation of the nation of Israel. He established the eternal capital, Jerusalem, where he inaugurated the worship of Yahweh. And he expanded Israel's borders through the conquest of many neighboring nations. Some of this is true; some is false. Much of it is either exaggerated or misunderstood. It is our task to understand what David actually accomplished, and why.

### *The New Capital*

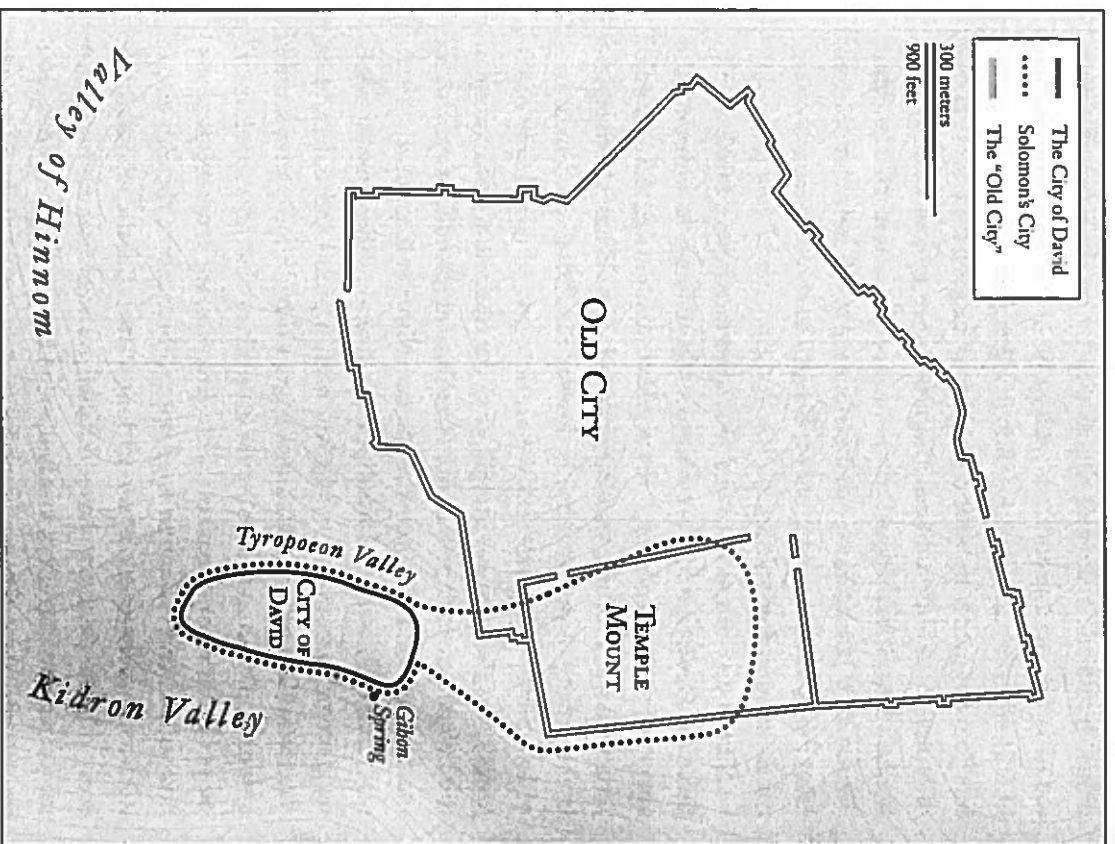
ONE OF DAVID'S FIRST acts upon becoming king of Israel was to conquer Jerusalem and establish it as his new capital. It was a smart choice. Jerusalem was an ancient city, and in fact an ancient capital city.<sup>1</sup> Archaeological discoveries have revealed that the city was probably inhabited as early as the fourth millennium BCE.<sup>2</sup> Its location, atop one of the higher hills in the area and fed by a reliable water source, made it a natural place to settle. There are references to Jerusalem in Egyptian texts from the twentieth century BCE, and in the fourteenth century BCE Jerusalem was the capital of a significant territory in the hills of Judah, complete with a king (albeit a vassal of Egypt). As with his choice of Hebron in Judah, David's choice of a capital had historical and cultural resonance.

Before David arrived, however, Jerusalem and its surrounding area had fallen under the control of a people known as the Jebusites. Like the Gibeonites, the Jebusites were a non-Israelite population. They were well enough ensconced in Jerusalem that the expansion of the Israelites throughout the surrounding region was not sufficient to displace them. This is reflected in the biblical account of the conquest, in which, among the lists of the many regions Joshua conquered, we find the notice that "the people of Judah could not dispossess the Jebusites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (Josh. 15:63). Thus Jerusalem goes unmentioned in the stories of Saul's reign, because, like Gibeon, it was not part of Saul's kingdom. For David, this presented an opportunity: rather than make his capital in part of Saul's former territory, or in the backwater of Judah, he could establish his own place, one with historical power but without any baggage from the Saulide legacy. Moreover, David could capture Jerusalem with his personal militia, rather than with any Judahite or Israelite help, and thereby turn the city into something of a private royal fiefdom—rightly called the "City of David."<sup>3</sup>

Jerusalem was also well located for David's purposes. As David was the first king to rule both Judah and Israel, it was important that

he choose a capital that would not appear to show favoritism toward either. Jerusalem is situated almost directly on the border between the two. The obvious modern analogy is the choice of Washington, D.C., as the new capital of the United States, positioned as it is on the line between the northern and southern states. We see David's choice of Jerusalem as almost divinely inspired, since we know that the city became the spiritual capital of the Judeo-Christian faith. The Bible, written after Jerusalem was well established as the holy city of Israel, takes the same perspective. But for David, the choice was purely tactical, a considered political move.<sup>4</sup>

The actual conquest of the city is narrated quite briefly in the Bible. As David and his forces were strong enough to withstand the attacks of the Philistines, it is reasonable to assume that the capture of Jerusalem was a relatively straightforward affair. What is perhaps lost in the brevity of the narrative is the way that David undid centuries of Jerusalem's independence. We are accustomed to thinking of the Jebusites as the enemy—after all, they are frequently listed as one of the indigenous nations that the Israelites were to dispossess during the conquest and are therefore aligned with the Canaanites. Yet in reality, the Jebusites had lived peacefully among the early Israelites for generations, and Jerusalem had been a proud and independent city for millennia. It is not surprising that David should have wanted it as his capital, nor that he would have taken what he wanted. But if we put ourselves in the place of the Jebusites, we may recognize just how sudden and violent an upheaval the conquest of the city was. It is hard to mourn a people who no longer exist. But the Jebusites, like every other ancient populace, had their own culture, their own history, their own narratives that had been cultivated for centuries. The mutual understanding between the Jebusites and the Israelites was undone in the flash of an eye. The creation of David's kingdom meant the destruction of the Jebusites. In fact, the Jebusites would become a metaphor for an obliterated people. In the book of the prophet Zechariah, the destruction of the Philistine cities is predicted, and of Ekron it is said, "Ekron shall be like the Jebusites" (9:7). David



Jerusalem

created a new nation, but in doing so he wiped another clean off the map. The Bible, and the traditions that emerged from it, consider this justified by the results, by the transformation of the city into Israel's glorious capital. But if it happened today, we would call it genocide.

The modern tourist walking the streets of Jerusalem's old city can still feel the power of the ancient site. As one passes through one of the seven gates embedded in the mighty walls, a few short turns lead to the Temple Mount, where the Wailing Wall supports the enormous platform on which the temple once stood, now dominated by the Dome of the Rock. From the top of the Temple Mount one can see the full panorama of hills and valleys all around, and one can sense how this place would have been the center of the kingdom. It all appears utterly befitting the capital city of the great David.

What most people do not realize, however, is that the Jerusalem they visit and worship in today has virtually nothing to do with the Jerusalem of David. The Wailing Wall is from the first century BCE, built by Herod the Great. The walls and gates are from the sixteenth century CE and were constructed by the Muslim conqueror Suleiman the Magnificent. The tourist site known as David's Tomb is a medieval building in very much the wrong location for David's actual burial site. The old city is not David's city.

David's city does remain, however, though few visitors find their way there. David's capital comprised what is now known as the City of David, a small spur to the southeast of the Temple Mount, outside of Suleiman's walls. It doesn't have the appearance of a great capital. For one thing, it is covered with private Israeli and Arab homes, with archaeological excavations only gradually revealing the ancient structures beneath. What's more, from top to bottom it is little more than half a kilometer in length, and from side to side, no more than a quarter of a kilometer. It is a tiny area. This was the Jerusalem that was settled and fortified in the millennia before David, and it was from here that a large swath of the hill country was governed in the second millennium BCE. Compared with the great imperial capitals of Egypt and Mesopotamia, or even with the relatively enormous cities of the

Philistines, the Jerusalem of David's time was incredibly small. Its size reminds us that the sort of magnificence we associate with kings and capitals today was not necessarily a feature of early Israel.<sup>5</sup> After all, Saul ruled from underneath a tree in his hometown.

One of the major reasons that capitals both ancient and modern tend to be larger than the average city—or tiny village—is that they need space to house and support all of the officials required for the task of governing. The more extensive the administrative structures, the more expansive the physical structures. Thus the tinniness of David's capital tells us something important about the nature of his administration. Despite ruling over a far larger territory than any Israelite before him, David did not fundamentally change the nature of Israelite leadership in a single generation. He imposed no national programs of taxation or construction—the types of programs that require robust centralized oversight. Such programs were foreign to Israel, literally: Israel's only experience with enforced taxation and labor would have been during its very early history, even before it was truly Israel, when Canaan was a vassal state of the powerful Egyptian empire.<sup>6</sup> Since it had come into its own, however, Israel had survived without that sort of centralized authority, and even after the monarchy was instituted this did not change. At most, Saul would on occasion require the towns under his authority to provide troops for military actions. David was very much in the same mold.

Indeed, like Saul, David maintained a limited administrative structure, surrounding himself with only a handful of people whom he felt he could trust (2 Sam. 8:16–18; 1 Chron. 18:15–17). Just as Saul's army commander was a relative, his cousin Abner, so too David chose a kinsman, in this case a nephew, as his commander: Joab, the son of Zeruiah, who according to Chronicles was David's sister.<sup>7</sup> Choosing a family member as chief military officer was prudent: as we have seen, the most likely source of a coup was from the ranks of the army, and so having a relative in that position assured some degree of loyalty. At the same time, by selecting a kinsman who was not in the direct line of succession, David could also be secure in the knowledge

that Joab would never have a rightful claim to the throne. Aside from Joab, David's cabinet consisted of Jehoshaphat, a “recorder,” probably something of a foreign minister; Shausha (also known as Seraiah), a scribe; and Benaiah, the head of David's personal bodyguards. There was also Adoram, who was in charge of forced labor—though this probably refers to the labor performed by foreigners David defeated, rather than by Israelites. Rounding out the list were David's two main priests, Abiathar and Zadok, both of whom had joined David back when he was living in the wilderness.

As in the case of his kinsman Joab and his old supporters Abiathar and Zadok, when it came to his most important military forces, David stuck to people he knew and trusted and who had been with him for some time. His bodyguards, known as the Cherethites and Pelethites, were probably of Philistine origin, as their titles, derived from Greek, suggest.<sup>8</sup> They were joined by six hundred soldiers from Gath under the leadership of a man named Ittai, who had been with David since his days in Ziklag. David's core soldiers, in other words, were his old Philistine compatriots, trustworthy perhaps precisely because they were foreigners. David's administration was minimal, which accords with the lack of any major national projects attributed to him.

The structures of government would change, in fact, only with Solomon, who seems to have recognized the opportunity that David's newly created united kingdom offered for the imposition of centralized authority. It is Solomon who created a taxation system for the nation and who imposed forced labor on the populace for the construction of new monumental buildings—with, as we will see, disastrous consequences. If it was a conscious decision at all, David was undoubtedly right to maintain the relatively simple mode of authority with which Israel had long been familiar. His power was an imposition upon the people no less than Solomon's, but David's kingship, like Saul's, probably did not affect the everyday life of most Israelites.

Still, David had achieved something beyond Saul, and he was not content to rule from beneath a tree as Saul had. Thus, according to the Bible, his first decision after conquering and redefining Jeru-

salem was to have a palace built for himself.<sup>9</sup> This is described in a single verse: “King Hiram of Tyre sent envoys to David with cedar trees, carpenters, and stonemasons; and they built a palace for David” (2 Sam. 5:11). We know nothing of the dimensions of this palace, though given the relatively restricted space in the City of David, it could not have been very large. We are also unsure of its exact location within David’s Jerusalem, though recent archaeological excavations have uncovered what may be part of it.<sup>10</sup> What separated a palace from a normal residence was its size and, perhaps more important, its mode of construction. Whereas the usual Israelite home was basically four rooms with walls made of mud-brick, a royal building was made of cedar and stone and required advanced knowledge of carpentry and masonry. This explains the perhaps unexpected appearance of the king of Tyre in the middle of the David story.

David’s palace was the first Israelite palace to be built. The Israelites had no experience with monumental construction; they had never had either a need to build anything on such a scale or the centralized administration to bring such a project to fruition. The nearest culture with such expertise was the Philistines—David may have come up with the idea of a palace from seeing the one in Gath when he had been a vassal of Achish—but it probably would have been bad form for David to ask them for help in this particular matter. Thus the next closest would have been the Phoenicians, living on the coast north of Israel. Tyre, an ancient and exceptionally wealthy seaport, was one of the great Phoenician cities and the closest to Israelite territory. If David wanted a palace, Tyre was the place to turn. Though the Bible suggests that Hiram sent supplies for the palace to David out of the goodness of his heart, or perhaps in recognition of David’s newly acquired status, it is certain that David paid for Hiram’s services. The Phoenicians were merchants, after all—they were not about to give their services away for nothing.

Every palace is a symbol, and David’s was no exception. Israel had entered a new era under him, and he was very aware of it. He was not a king like Saul, accepted by the people as a military leader. He was a

conqueror, ruling by force, and his power required a physical manifestation unlike anything Israel had seen before. He would not live as everyone else lived; his dwelling would be that of a foreigner. By building himself a royal home, David announced, again, his distinction among all of Israel. Saul was merely an elevated Israelite. David was a monarch.

### *David and the Ark of the Covenant*

JERUSALEM IS FAMOUS, HOWEVER, not for being the administrative center of Israel, but for being its religious center. And perhaps David’s most significant achievement as king, at least in terms of the lasting effects of his actions, was to turn this former Jebusite city into the heart of Israel’s faith.

The Israelite landscape in David’s time was dotted with sanctuaries, local shrines serving the needs of one or more communities. There was little sense of a “national” religion. Though Israel’s sanctuaries were devoted to the same god, and probably shared many similar cultic practices, they were not outlets of a centralized cult, but rather independent “mom-and-pop” operations, with priestly lineages stretching back into the distant past.<sup>11</sup> Many of these sanctuaries were very ancient and had their own legends attached to them. The shrine at Bethel, for example, claimed that its sanctity derived from having been the spot where God spoke to the ancestor Jacob, a claim that has found its way into the Bible in multiple places.<sup>12</sup> Others told different stories, and some relied merely on their long standing in the community. And one shrine laid claim to a physical object that was understood to be God’s very throne: the ark of the covenant.

For all of its importance, we know remarkably little about the ark. Though it is described in some detail in the Bible, it is described in contradictory ways. In Exodus, it is depicted as a gold-plated box with a golden cover, mounted by golden cherubim (not pudgy babies, but fearsome winged lions). In Deuteronomy, by contrast, it is described

as a plain wooden box without adornment. Its function is also differently conceived: in Exodus it is the physical seat of God, the center of God's literal dwelling-place, the Tabernacle, and it is from atop the ark that God communicates with Moses. In Deuteronomy, it is merely the receptacle for the tablets of the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments), kept in the innermost sanctuary of the temple. In yet a third passage, in Numbers, the ark is used as a palladium, a sort of military standard that went before the Israelites on their march through the wilderness.

In truth, the ark is most easily understood as the Israelite equivalent of an idol. That is, it is the physical representation of the deity—not the form of the deity, but its presence in the midst of the people. Like an idol in a non-Israelite temple, the ark stood in the innermost sanctuary, the place where the deity was understood to dwell. Just as copies of ancient Near Eastern treaties were placed in the temples of the respective parties so that the gods could act as witnesses, the ark—at least in Deuteronomy—was the location of the most fundamental covenant between God and Israel. And just as non-Israelites took their idols out to battle with them to guarantee victory, so too the Israelites took the ark with them. Obviously, it was not really an idol—it was not worshipped as if it were God himself. But in its function it was the symbolic equivalent.

The ark belonged originally to the sanctuary at Shiloh, a major cultic site in the hills of Ephraim. It is likely that its presence there played a significant role in the importance of Shiloh's sanctuary, investing it with special sanctity and probably making it a center for pilgrimages. In the book of Joshua, Shiloh is where the Israelites assembled to apportion the newly conquered promised land (18:1). It is to Shiloh that Elkannah and his wife Hannah went annually to offer sacrifices, where Hannah prayed for a son, and where Samuel spent his youth and received his call from God (1 Sam. 1:3). As the ark was a physical manifestation of God's presence, it was natural for Shiloh to be a center for oracular inquiry, like an Israelite Delphi. Shiloh was not the only sanctuary in Israel, but it was a central cultic site and the

only one to lay claim to the ark. For most purposes—for the usual offerings and priestly inquiries—a local sanctuary would suffice. Shiloh would have served as a sanctuary for exceptional occasions.<sup>11</sup>

Among these occasions would have been those rare times when the Israelite tribes came together to defend themselves against external threat—like an attack by the Philistines. At such moments the priests of Shiloh would bear the ark into battle, as a sign that the God of the Israelites was fighting on their behalf. In the battle of Eben-ezer, however, described in 1 Samuel 4, the ark was captured. Though it eventually found its way back into Israelite hands, it would never again reside at Shiloh. It was kept for about a generation in the Gibeonite town of Kiriyath-jearim, just east of Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup> And there it remained until David became king and found himself in possession of a capital with no religious significance.<sup>15</sup>

Jerusalem had a cult before David, but it was not an Israelite cult because Jerusalem was not an Israelite city. As the very name of the city shows, Jerusalem—"Foundation of Shalem"—was devoted to an old Semitic deity, Shalem, a god of dusk or of the evening star.<sup>16</sup> To make his capital an Israelite cultic center, therefore, David had to start afresh. But this was not as easy as, say, building a church or synagogue is today. Cultic sites had long histories and associations stretching back into the past that justified their sanctity. David's new capital had none of this. He could hardly get away with making up a story explaining how Jerusalem, a well-known foreign city, was actually of great Israelite religious significance; there could be no founding legend like that of the Bethel cult. What he needed was something tangible, something everyone would recognize as marking God's presence. And the ark was just a few kilometers away.<sup>17</sup>

As with so many other parts of the David story, when we read it in retrospect we take it for granted that the ark should have been brought to Jerusalem. But, as with so much else, this hardly would have been obvious to an Israelite in David's time. If the ark was not to remain in Kiriyath-jearim, its rightful place would have been at Shiloh, its traditional home, or at the very least at another established

Israelite sanctuary.<sup>18</sup> The ark did not get to Jerusalem of its own accord. David took it—and it is likely that he took it by force. According even to the biblical account, before going to Kiryath-jearim David “assembled all the picked men of Israel, thirty thousand strong; then David and all the people that were with him set out” (2 Sam. 6:1–2). The biblical authors may want us to understand this as a show of honor, or as a sign of the ark’s role in military affairs. But in practical terms, the effect of David and his entire army descending on the town where the ark was held would have been one of implicit, if not explicit, threat.<sup>19</sup> As we have seen, David always took what he wanted whenever he could. What he wanted now was the most important religious emblem in Israel, and he had more than enough men to ensure that he got it. Whatever benefits the inhabitants of Kiryath-jearim enjoyed during the ark’s stay in their small town were gone in an instant. Whatever ancient rights Shiloh may have had to the ark were ignored. As with so many other things, the changes that David made to the long-established fabric of Israel’s society were unilateral and abrupt.

The biblical story of the ark’s journey from Kiryath-jearim to Jerusalem describes quite reasonably how it was loaded onto a cart and conveyed by oxen, accompanied by music and dancing. Where it turns unlikely is in the moment when a man named Uzzah reached for the ark to steady it and was struck down by God on the spot. This episode is nothing more than an etiology for a place named Perez-uzzah, “the breach of Uzzah,” and has no historical significance. It does, however, speak to a well-established Israelite tradition that the ark was so holy that it was in fact dangerous. And this tradition explains why it was not immediately taken to Jerusalem but stayed for three months in the house of one Obed-edom. In the biblical narrative, David commanded that the ark be kept there after witnessing the death of Uzzah. In reality, it seems more likely that David wanted to ensure that the tradition of the ark’s inherent danger was not one that he needed to fear. Obed-edom was essentially a guinea pig, a royal taster, making sure that the king would not suffer any harm.

One can imagine that the poor man was terrified of his responsibility, though it turned out he had nothing to fear. When it was clear that Obed-edom had experienced no adversity because of the presence of the ark in his home, it continued its delayed procession into the City of David.

The final leg of the ark’s journey was accompanied by grand ceremony. After every six steps taken in the procession, David sacrificed an ox and a ram.<sup>20</sup> The symbolism of this ritual would not have been lost on any observer. On the one hand, David was positioning himself as priest—he was taking on the cultic role of sacrificial officiant, making it clear that the ark was now a royal object. Though this confusion of roles may seem unusual from a modern standpoint, in the ancient world, including Israel, it was very common for kings to play a priestly role on special occasions.<sup>21</sup> Doing so was a way to explicitly connect the monarch and the deity, to demonstrate not only that the deity had special care for the king, but that the cultic apparatus was under royal control. By leading the sacrifices before the ark himself, David turned an ethnic and national cultic symbol into a royal cultic symbol. On the other hand, the sheer volume of the sacrifices—an ox and a ram every six steps—would have sent a clear message regarding David’s personal wealth. For the average Israelite, an ox or a ram would have been enormously expensive, and sacrifices of such animals would have been rare and reserved for only the most important moments.

It is also noteworthy that these sacrifices were rather unlike any commonly known in Israel. There were essentially two types of sacrifice: burnt offerings, during which the entire animal was burned on the altar, and well-being offerings, during which part of the animal was burned and part consumed by the offerer. Each sacrifice had a specific function: burnt offerings to curry God’s favor or express thanks, and well-being offerings for communal celebration in a cultic context.<sup>22</sup> David’s offerings, however, fit neither category. It is impossible that the animals should have been burned, for they were offered every six steps—and besides, there is no indication that an altar was

available on which to burn them. But if the sacrifices weren't burned, then no part of them reached God—for it is the smoke that conveys the sacrifice to the deity. In other words, David's sacrifices were pure show. His ostentatious offerings again would have reminded the people that he was not one of them, that he was different not only in title, but in kind.

Upon the ark's arrival in the City of David, further sacrifices were offered—this time the appropriate ones, a burnt offering and a well-being offering—after which David “blessed the people in the name of Yahweh of Hosts” (2 Sam. 6:18). This again reinforces David's position at the head of the cult: aside from the regular blessing of sons by fathers, blessing is an act generally reserved for the deity and his appointed human messengers, be they priests or prophets. David claimed possession of the cultic symbol of the ark, and now he firmly claimed the religious role appropriate to that possession.

The final ceremonial act of the ark's procession into the City of David was a purely secular one. David distributed to all the people present—according to the Bible, unrealistically, “the entire multitude of Israel, man and woman alike” (6:19)—bread and cakes. This is a transparently political move. David had already established his unique wealth with his sacrifices. Now he did so again, with offerings not to God, but to the people. David had long known the power of a well-timed gift, as he showed with his redistribution of spoils to Judah. At that time, he was illustrating the benefits of military and administrative subservience. Now his gifts demonstrated the benefits of religious adherence to the newly established royal cult.

From start to finish, the procession of the ark into Jerusalem was constructed so as to elevate David to new heights in the eyes of the people. He endowed his new capital with religious significance by laying claim to the most prominent symbol of God's presence in all of Israel. He made himself out to be the central officiant of the new Jerusalem cult. And he both displayed his personal wealth and made clear the rewards that were available to those who accepted the new religious reality at the heart of the new Davidic kingdom. The bring-

ing of the ark to Jerusalem is often viewed as a sign of David's great piety, but it was in fact a shrewd political move. David had claimed the political leadership of Israel by force. Now he had done the same with Israel's religion.

In our modern age, with its common notion of a transcendent God who is accessible from anywhere through the intangibles of prayer and faith, the material realities of ancient religion are easy to overlook. In early Israel, God was not transcendent, but very much physically present, even if invisibly so. God had said to Moses, “I will come to you and bless you” (Exod. 20:21) at every sanctuary; “For there I will meet with you, and there I will speak with you, and there I will meet with the Israelites. . . . I will dwell among the Israelites” (Exod. 29:42–43, 45). Sanctuaries were divine places where the deity was literally present. And though prayer was a means of communicating with God, it was not generally sufficient by itself. Sacrifice—the burning of a slaughtered animal on an altar, the bringing of raw or cooked grains, the pouring of wine libations—was the primary mode of appeal to the divine. When we put these two elements together, it becomes clear that the cult was not only a spiritual enterprise, but also an economic one. The ritual laws written by the priestly class of Israel, those found in Leviticus, not only invent new types of sacrifices previously unknown in Israel—the guilt offering and the purification (or sin) offering—but also institute rules about purity that require abundant sacrifices when none was needed in the culture before.<sup>23</sup> Almost every sacrifice (with the exception of the burnt offering) required that the offerer give some portion of the animal to the priests. Often, sanctuaries kept their own herds and flocks so that offerers, rather than bringing their own animals, could simply buy one from the sanctuary and offer it instead.<sup>24</sup> Tithing and offering the first fruits of the harvest or the firstborn of the herd and flock were ways to ensure the continuity of God's favor on the part of the offerer—and were ways for the priests to ensure the continual growth of the sanctuary's finances. The priesthood was a lucrative job, and sanctuaries were the most well-established economic cornerstones of Israelite society.<sup>25</sup>



Moreover, three times a year, on the major agricultural festivals, it was common practice for Israelites to make a pilgrimage to a sanctuary. As the great pilgrimage sites from medieval Europe demonstrate, significant ancillary economic advantage could be gained from these visits: pilgrims need shelter, food, and other supplies, and the local economy booms as a result.<sup>26</sup> In practical terms, this meant that there was some competition for the faithful, at least among the largest and most important sanctuaries. An entire community could be sustained on the strength of a local sanctuary. Thus an ambitious sanctuary needed a “draw,” something to make its altar more attractive than the one a few towns over. The same combination of cult and economy carried forward into Christianity, for which the cult of the saints, centered on the possession of relics, served as a major source of income for shrines throughout the Christian world from the fourth and fifth centuries to the present day.<sup>27</sup>

In ancient Israel, physical objects—such as the ark—could also do the trick. This sort of competition is behind the story in 1 Kings 12 of Jeroboam’s golden calves. Having split Israel off from Solomon’s united kingdom, Jeroboam needed to draw the religious economy back away from Jerusalem. So he made two golden calves—symbols of Yahweh—and put one in Bethel, a town near the southern border of Israel, and one in Dan, to the north, saying, “You have been going to Jerusalem long enough” (12:28).

All of this is to say that in bringing the ark to Jerusalem, David was after more than the Israelites’ faith—he was after their wallets as well. To make Jerusalem a viable center for sacrifice, one key element was required: a public altar on which to offer the sacrifices. The biblical story of how David came to build this altar, in 2 Samuel 24, is complex and decidedly theological. God, rather bizarrely, incited David to take a census and punished him for it by bringing a plague on Israel. When the plague reached Jerusalem, God stopped it just as his messenger of destruction was at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. In thanks, David chose this spot as the place where he would build an altar and bought the property from Araunah.

There is undoubtedly a kernel of historical truth in the notion that David took a census. The census in Israel existed solely for the purposes of identifying men of fighting age; it was the first step in military conscription.<sup>28</sup> For this reason, the census was generally viewed negatively by the majority of the Israelite population, including the biblical authors, who describe it as instigated by God for the purpose of punishment: conscription was yet another means by which the monarchy, an untrustworthy institution to begin with, could impose itself on the freedom of the people. Given the military function of the census, however, and David’s understandable need to know what sort of fighting force he could muster from his new kingdom, it is reasonable to assume that he did indeed take a census, probably relatively early in his kingship. The story of the plague, however, appears to be no more than an etiology for why the altar was built where it was. Yet no such narrative is really required—David’s motivations for building the altar and his choice of the threshing floor of Araunah are logical in and of themselves.

As we have already seen in the story of Keilah, the threshing floor was among the most prominent public spaces in every community. It needed to be large enough to accommodate a good number of people, for everyone would have been harvesting and threshing at the same time each year. It also needed to be in an open space, where the wind could blow away the chaff. As noted earlier, for walled cities—like Jerusalem, which had been fortified since at least the Jebusite era—this meant that the threshing floor would be outside the city walls. As Jerusalem was built on a hillside, the natural location for the threshing floor would have been the flat area to the north—what is now known as the Temple Mount.<sup>29</sup> There hardly could be a better location for the altar. It would be prominent above the city, as close to the heavens as the landscape could allow. And the transformation of an agricultural area into a cultic one would signal that Jerusalem was a distinctively religious center, with enough open space to serve the needs of the pilgrims who would come to sacrifice before the ark. By taking over and repurposing the threshing floor, David made cer-

rain that his capital would no longer be an agricultural community, but an urban one, dependent on royal income—both political and sacrificial—rather than on the land.

Who was Araunah the Jebusite, the man from whom David purchased this property? Most likely he was actually no one at all. Though Araunah is commonly understood, even by the biblical authors, as a personal name, it is almost certainly a Hittite title, *arwina*, meaning “lord.”<sup>30</sup> That is, this threshing floor originally belonged to the previous Jebusite ruler of Jerusalem and was a sort of state-owned property. If this is the case, then we can also dismiss the notion that David bought the land from “Araunah.” Although the Jebusite community may not have been completely eradicated when David conquered the city, it is certain that the Jebusite ruler would have been subject to David’s hungry sword. When David began his reign as the new king in Jerusalem, this royal property would have devolved directly to him. He would have had no need to purchase it—it was already his.

From the perspective of the biblical authors, however, it was important that David purchase the land—indeed, they depict Araunah as trying to give it to David as a gift, and David refusing. The depth of Israel’s connection to the site of its temple was such that no possibility could be allowed for anyone else to make a rightful claim on the property. This same impulse is at the root of the story of Abraham’s purchase of the cave of Machpelah in Genesis 23 (where, as in our passage, the property is first offered as a gift): the land is fully Israelite only if the claim to it is undeniable by both its previous and its current owners. It was thus important for the biblical authors to make certain that the site of the altar in Jerusalem—which would become the site of the temple—was authentically and incontestably Israelite. David, however, would not have had such qualms. Taking the property of others was never a difficulty for him.

The threshing floor of the Jebusite city thus became the cultic center of David’s new capital, and it is to this spot that he also moved the ark, protected by its traditional tent. Just as the threshing floor was the economic center of most Israelite communities, so now the

ark and its altar would become the economic centers of David’s Jerusalem, a communal space not only for the surrounding area, but, in theory, for the nation as a whole.

The establishment of Jerusalem as a religious center may have been a shrewd economic move by David, but it also served a greater symbolic purpose. Throughout the ancient Near East, the king and the deity were closely intertwined.<sup>31</sup> In Mesopotamia, kings were understood to have been divinely appointed to rule; they engaged in divine rituals such as the “sacred marriage,” in which they symbolically slept with a goddess; they are depicted in art as taking the form of a deity.<sup>32</sup> Among the Hittites, the king was also the chief priest of the land; one shrine shows the king being embraced by a god; and upon his death, the king was said to “become a god.”<sup>33</sup> In Egypt the equation was simple: the pharaoh was himself a living god.<sup>34</sup> Such explicit deification was an impossibility in Israelite religion—but it would have been natural for David to want to demonstrate God’s approval of his reign.<sup>35</sup> The presence of the ark in his new capital accomplished this end.

What we have in David’s bringing of the ark to Jerusalem, then, is the beginning of Israelite royal theology: the notion that Israel’s king was akin to God’s steward on earth. Saul, David’s sole predecessor on the throne of Israel, ruled by consent of the people, his reign legitimized by his ability to protect Israel from its enemies. David, by contrast, positioned himself as divinely legitimized—a position he was more in need of than Saul, for David ruled not by popular consent, but by force. This claim of divine approval, and even selection, was a common technique for establishing power. When Babylon was briefly captured by the invading Chaldean people in the late eighth century BCE, the conquering king claimed that Marduk, the chief god of Babylon, had personally selected him to rule.<sup>36</sup> Centuries later, when the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon, he made the same claim.<sup>37</sup> This is royal propaganda at its best: an attempt to persuade a defeated enemy that their new overlord came to power by the choice of their own deity. Though there is

no reason to doubt that David authentically worshipped the Israelite deity Yahweh, his possession of the ark in Jerusalem sent much the same message.

In time, this royal theology would come to encompass not only David's reign, but that of his entire dynasty. It is therefore understandable that in the seventh to sixth centuries BCE a biblical author would explicitly link the arrival of the ark in Jerusalem to God's promise of an uninterrupted Davidic lineage on the throne. This is the famous passage in 2 Samuel 7, following directly on the ark's entrance into the city, in which God promises David through the prophet Nathan that God "will establish a house [that is, a dynasty] for you. When your days are done and you lie with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own issue, and I will establish his kingship. . . . Your house and your kingdom shall ever be secure before me; your throne shall be established forever" (7:11–12, 16). This is the fundamental statement of the royal Davidic ideology, projected back onto the beginning of the dynasty by authors who had known uninterrupted Davidic kingship for the previous three hundred years.<sup>36</sup> The text is pure theological invention, but its roots are in the reality of David's establishment of Jerusalem as a royal cultic site.

This chapter in 2 Samuel seeks not only to justify David's dynasty as divinely ordained, but also to address a well-known fact that must have pressed heavily on the minds of the later pro-David authors: David, the great king, did not build the temple in Jerusalem. According to 2 Samuel 7, David is promised his dynasty because he wanted to build the temple, but was dissuaded by God himself: "I have not dwelt in a house from the day that I brought the people of Israel out of Egypt to this day, but have moved about in tent and Tabernacle" (7:6). This text explains, then, why David did not build the temple; but it fails to explain why, if God was uninterested in such a dwelling, David's son Solomon would be allowed to construct one. In the fourth-century BCE books of Chronicles, this logical inconsistency is recognized, and it is explained that David did not build the temple

because he was a man of war, whereas Solomon was a man of peace. Both explanations are apologetic. What is commonly agreed is that David did not build the temple. The question that the biblical authors seek to answer is, why not?

In truth, this question is relevant only from a later perspective, when the temple was the center of Israel's religious existence and David was recognized as the greatest king in Israel's history. Modern scholars have fallen sway to the same forces, often going to lengths similar to those of the biblical authors to explain why David didn't build the temple. From the historian's perspective, the question may be answered relatively simply: David did not build the temple—or, better, *a* temple—because he had no need to do so. He had the ark and an altar, and thus both the enticement for pilgrims and the means by which they could offer their sacrifices. A physical temple was unnecessary, and, what's more, David may have seen a temple as potentially drawing the revenues from the cult away from the royal court. Without a physical temple, the priesthood in Jerusalem was under David's control: appointed by him and maintained by him. And, at least according to one passage, David's own sons served as priests—a common reality in the ancient world but an embarrassment to later biblical texts such as Chronicles, for which the idea of anyone from a nonpriestly lineage serving in the cult was unthinkable.<sup>37</sup> The Jerusalem cult was a family business, and David had no reason to create any structures that might take on a life of their own. The Bible wants us to believe that David would have built the temple if he could have. The real question should not be "Why didn't David build the temple?" but rather "Why would David build a temple?" If David didn't build the temple, it is because he had no desire to.

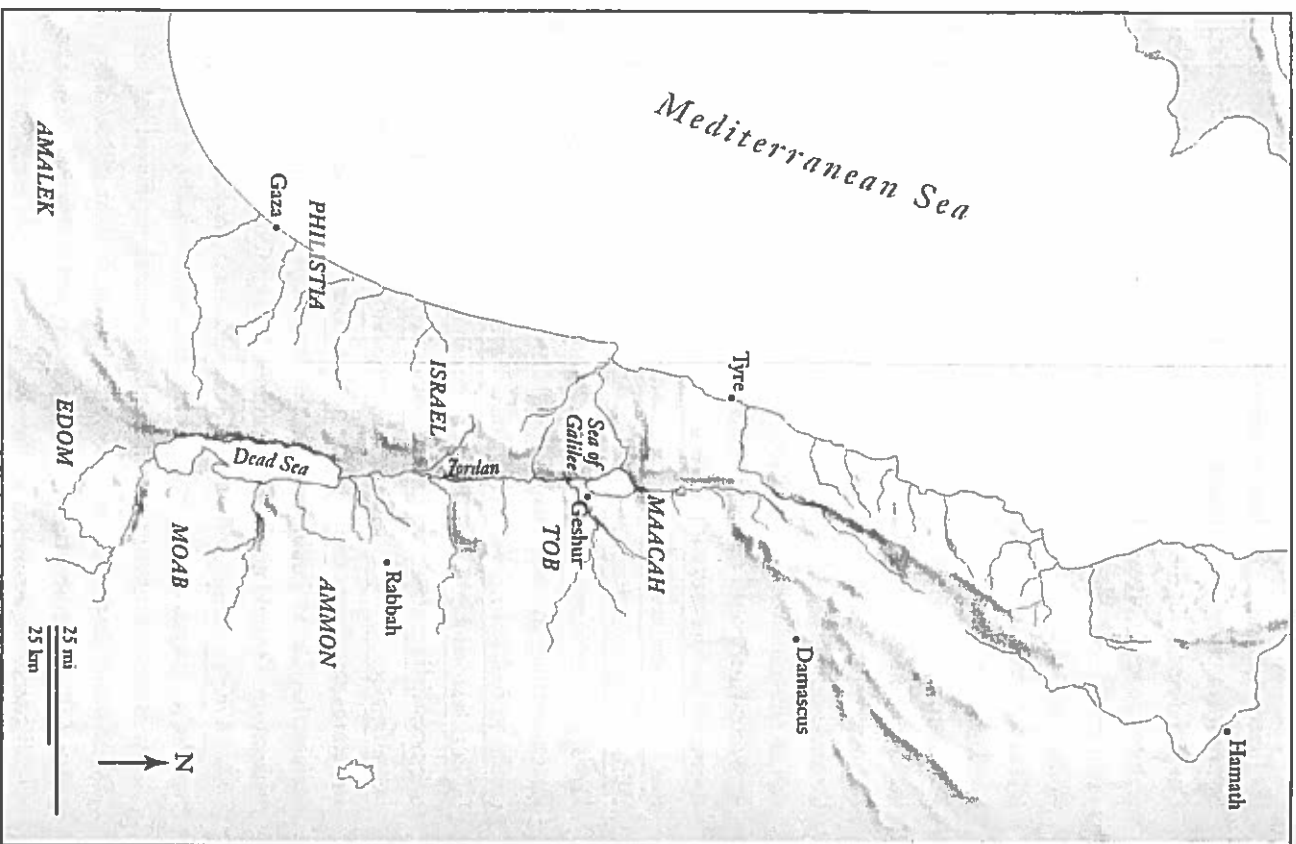
By inaugurating the Israelite cult in Jerusalem, David accomplished something of lasting value, an achievement that still resonates today. Like the unification of the northern and southern tribes, the establishment of Jerusalem as the religious center of Israel changed the course of history. All of the emotions tied up in the city—from the exilic cry in Psalm 137, "If I forget thee, O Zion," to the medi-

Yes!  
I  
know  
it  
2 Sam 7:11

eval zealotry of the Crusades, all the way to the present conflicts over the status of Jerusalem as a joint Israeli and Palestinian capital—are grounded in David's vision for his capital. It is tempting to apply our own feelings about Jerusalem back into David's time, to ascribe to him the passion and the piety that the city inspires in us. The biblical authors themselves succumbed to this temptation. But David acted for far more mundane reasons. The choice of Jerusalem as his capital and the decision to make it a religious center for Israel were primarily political and economic. They were grounded in the realities of David's seizure of the throne and his need to establish himself and his government in the eyes of a conquered and resentful populace. The results, centuries on, may have benefited the entire nation, but the motivations were self-serving.

### *David's Empire*

FROM THE CENTER OF David's kingdom, Jerusalem, we may look outward to the peripheries. For David is lauded not only for his piety, but also for his military conquests; he is credited with expanding the borders and influence of Israel to virtually all the surrounding nations. David's kingdom is often described as an empire, collecting tribute from the vanquished foes all around. The biblical claim to such an empire has remained a fundamental aspect of Jewish self-definition for millennia—so much so that when the state of Israel was founded in 1948, it was understood by many that, since David had conquered most of what is now Jordan and Syria, Israel was, in accepting a partition of Palestine that gave it a rather small territory, generously relinquishing its traditional rights to more than half of David's empire in the name of peace with its neighbors. David's conquests are an important touchstone for the history of the land of Israel. Yet virtually everything we know about these victories comes from a single chapter in the Bible, 2 Samuel 8. It is our task to evaluate these biblical claims and the picture of David's kingdom that they present.<sup>40</sup>



Israel's Neighbors

The first Israelite victory recorded in 2 Samuel 8 is over the Philistines. It is natural enough for the biblical authors to emphasize David's battles against the Philistines by placing them at the head of the chapter, for victory over Israel's longtime nemesis was one of the basic rationales for both Saul's and David's kingships in the first place. The extent of this victory is ambiguous, however. It is usually assumed that David actually defeated the Philistine heartland along the coast, thereby establishing Israel's right to that fertile territory—including what we now call the Gaza Strip. The text, however, says only that David attacked "Philistines," not "*the* Philistines." It seems that this battle was not a full-fledged assault on the Philistine homeland. Gezer, the Philistine-controlled town closest to Israelite territory, was still in Philistine hands into the reign of Solomon. David never conquered the Philistines in any substantial way. They remained firmly in control of their coastal cities for the duration of his life.

The second verse of 2 Samuel 8 records David's victory over Moab, the nation across the Jordan to the east of Judah (present-day Jordan). Unlike the long-established Philistine enemy, in David's time Moab had barely coalesced into a meaningful political entity.<sup>41</sup> It is therefore somewhat unclear what it even would have meant for David to conquer the entire nation of Moab. Then again, the text never quite makes that claim explicitly, though it tries to imply it. On the contrary, just as in the case of the Philistines in the previous verse, the Bible provides no detail whatsoever about the scope of David's victory. Not a single town or region is mentioned—which strongly suggests that not a single town or region was taken, for the biblical authors would be sure to say so.<sup>42</sup> This may have been a border skirmish, perhaps the result of some small band of Moabites testing the strength of the new kingdom to their west. Regime change was often the occasion for such adventures in the ancient Near East. It was never obvious how powerful a new ruler would be, and thus the rise of a new king often coincided with external attacks or internal revolts.<sup>43</sup> Such may have been the case here, too. Most important, there is no record of Moab having been subjugated by David. In the

monumental inscription of the Moabite king Mesha from the end of the ninth century BCE, the subjugation of Moab is attributed to the Israelite king Omri, who ruled a century after David.<sup>44</sup> Thus we have here another example of the biblical authors suggesting that David controlled territory that he did not.

From the Philistines in the west and the Moabites in the east, 2 Samuel 8 turns north, to describe David's defeat of the Arameans led by Hadadezer, the king of Zobah—territory that now belongs to Syria. Here again, however, the text implies more than it proves. The battle described in 2 Samuel 8:3–13 did not take place on Aramean soil, but rather in Ammon, the Transjordanian nation north of Moab. Ammon had been Israel's enemy during Saul's reign—in fact, some if not all of Saul's authority derived from his ability to successfully defend the town of Jabesh-Gilead from the advances of the Ammonite king Nahash (1 Sam. 11). Saul's enemy, however, was David's friend: David refers to the fact that Nahash "kept faith" with him, using a technical term for treaty partnership. After the death of Nahash and the rise of his son Hanun to the Ammonite throne, however, David recognized an opportunity to test the limits of his power—again, regime change and international renegotiations went hand in hand. The war against Ammon also served a political purpose for David within Israel. His rejection of his former treaty obligations to Ammon would have been popular with the Israelites, especially those in Gilead, the region most directly threatened by Ammon.

Upon David's aggression, Ammon turned for help to its allies in Aram, and soldiers came from Zobah, Maacah, and Tob, city-states just to the north of Israelite territory. It is the sequence of battles against these armies, detailed in 2 Samuel 10, that is referred to in 2 Samuel 8 as the defeat of the Arameans. David did not extend Israel's borders to the north, into Aram—he extended them east, across the Jordan into Ammon. The Arameans he defeated were not even in Aramean territory.<sup>45</sup> There is thus no record of David campaigning in Aram, to the north of Israel. He never occupied Aramean territory—nor does the text ever say that he did. The text implies it, perhaps, but

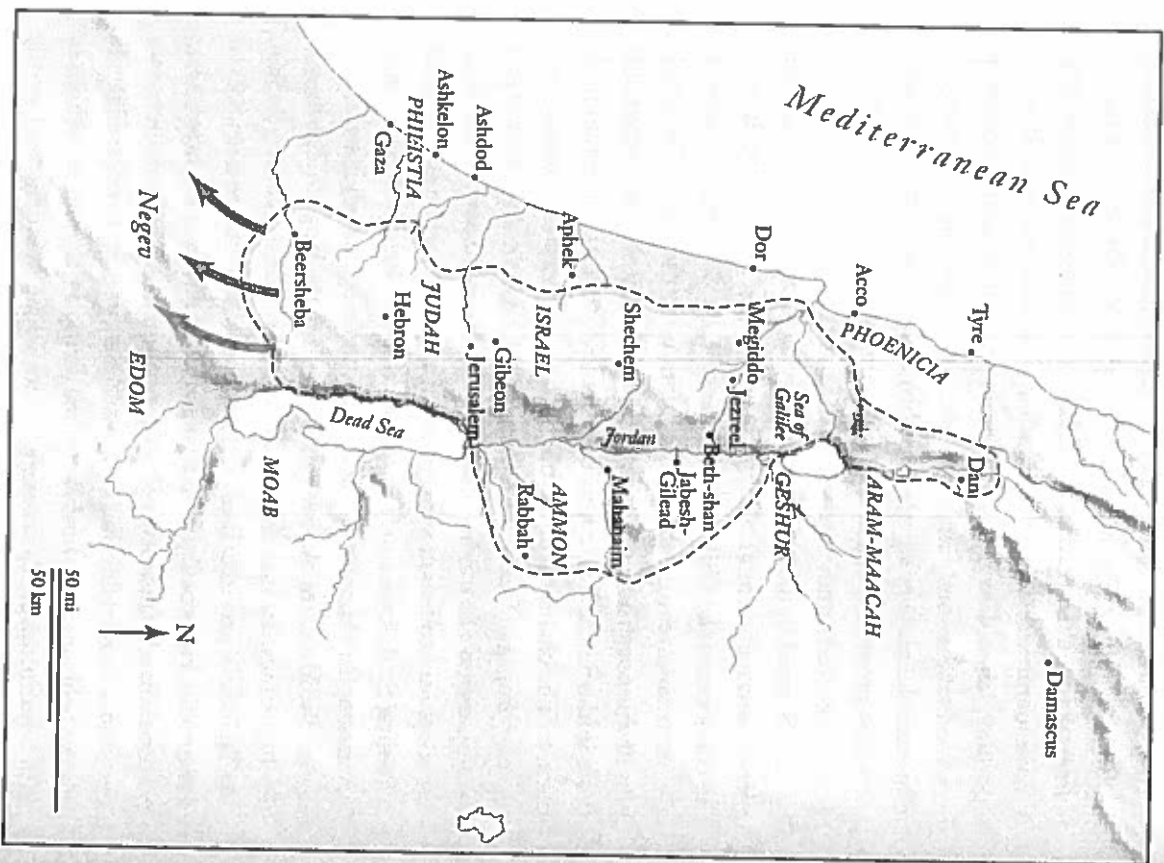
had David really taken this territory, the biblical authors would have proclaimed and celebrated it.

Ammon, on the other hand—the actual object of the battles in which David fought the Arameans—was authentically subjugated. It is striking to note the difference between the reports that imply conquest where there was none and those that describe real conquests. Whereas details of territory taken and cities captured are lacking in those texts that can be classified as exaggerations, the notice of the conquest of Ammon is detailed. “Joab attacked Rabbah of Ammon”—the capital—“and captured the royal city” (2 Sam. 12:26). We cannot find this sort of explicit statement in any other account of David’s conquests, from his early days in Saul’s service to his time on the throne of Israel. This is a factual statement of victory over a foreign capital. It is the only one—and it is therefore the only one that can be trusted. We are further told that David gained possession of the royal crown of Ammon and carried off booty from the city. Moreover, he subjected the inhabitants of Rabbah to forced labor, “with saws, iron threshing boards, and iron axes, or assigned them to brickmaking” (12:31)—and here is where Adoram, who is in charge of forced labor for David, probably made his living, as there is no evidence that David ever subjected Israelites to labor.<sup>46</sup> This description is again in contrast to what we find elsewhere, where references to booty and forced labor are generic at best. When the biblical authors have details to give, they give them—and when they don’t, they don’t.

The last victory mentioned in 2 Samuel 8 is over the Edomites, the nation to the southeast of Israel. Early in its existence, Edom’s territory was confined mostly to the southern Negev, as we know from the biblical story in Numbers 21 of the Israelites’ wandering in the wilderness: they are prevented from moving straight up into Canaan by the Edomites, whose territory they are forced to circumvent.<sup>47</sup> The value of this territory was mostly for its trade routes, which brought rare goods—spices and precious metals—into Israel from Arabia.<sup>48</sup> Although the notice of David’s subjugation of Edom is brief (“He stationed garrisons in Edom—in all of Edom he stationed garrisons—

and all the Edomites became vassals of David” (8:14)) it may be trustworthy. Solomon controlled Edomite territory, as he kept his fleet in the Edomite city of Ezion-geber (1 Kings 9:26). But the fact that in Solomon’s time this area was still referred to as Edomite suggests that it was not annexed to Israel, but rather controlled by Israel. It seems most likely, then, that David’s conquest of Edom consisted mostly of his seizure of the southern Negev and the establishment of garrisons to protect the trade route. Remarkably, archaeological evidence supports this process: an unusually high number of settlements in the Negev appeared out of nowhere in the tenth century BCE.<sup>49</sup>

In 2 Samuel 8, then, we have the biblical argument for the creation of a Davidic empire. The text is arranged geographically, with the conquest of the Philistines to the west, the Moabites to the east, the Arameans to the north, and the Edomites to the south. The artfulness of this construction is telling, especially when we recognize that those in the north, the Arameans, were really defeated in Ammon, to the east. The chapter is not a straightforward historical account, but a piece of propaganda, intended to magnify David’s conquests and give the impression of a mighty empire stretching in all directions. Notably, it appears to be yet another piece of pro-David one-upmanship regarding Saul, for we may note the verse that describes Saul’s military triumphs: “He waged war on every side against all his enemies: against the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, the kings of Zobah, and the Philistines, and wherever he turned he worsted them” (1 Sam. 14:47). This is precisely the list of nations we find in 2 Samuel 8, even down to the kings of Zobah. David hardly could be made to seem less powerful than his unworthy predecessor when it came to military success, and 2 Samuel 8 is the biblical authors’ attempt to ensure David’s legacy. Scholars have further argued that this chapter is of a piece with royal propaganda from elsewhere in the Near East, especially monumental inscriptions relating the victories of kings over their many enemies.<sup>50</sup> The text, like its parallels from elsewhere, implies great achievements without quite stating them explicitly. As a piece of propaganda, it has been remarkably successful. Even the later biblical



David's Kingdom

authors of the two books of Chronicles accepted the story as presented here: Chronicles says explicitly that David captured Gath from the Philistines (1 Chron. 18:2), a claim made nowhere in Samuel.

In the end, then, what can we say about the extent of David's kingdom? To the west, it was no larger than it had been in Saul's time. The Philistines still controlled all of their traditional territory. David's kingdom never reached the coast of the Mediterranean. To the north, Israel also maintained its previous boundaries, with the northernmost point still being the city of Dan. This is reflected in the Bible in the typical description of Israel's territory: "from Dan to Beersheba," a phrase used to describe Israel in the time of Samuel (1 Sam. 3:20), at the time of David's census (2 Sam. 24:2), and in the time of Solomon (1 Kings 5:5). The Arameans remained a formidable power to the north, becoming Israel's main rival and even overlord in the ninth century BCE. To the south, David made inroads into the Negev territory of the Edomites, though this was less a conquest than a transfer of influence. This area was virtually uninhabited before David installed garrisons there to protect the trade routes. The traditional phrase "from Dan to Beersheba" reflects the fact that Beersheba remained the southernmost major settlement in Israelite territory, even after David.

It was only to the east, in his conquest of Ammon, that David expanded with any real force. Yet this was really not such a great distance—Rabbah is only about twenty miles from the Jordan valley, and there was little of Ammon to the east of that, as the mountains give way to uninterrupted desert. What's more, the territories just to the east of the Jordan were probably already Israelite, or at least pro-Israelite, rather than Ammonite, for these are the regions in which the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and part of Manasseh are said to have settled (Num. 32). Consider, for example, Jabesh-Gilead, the town oppressed by the Ammonites, the town that rescued Saul's body from the wall: it is on the Ammonite side of the Jordan. This diminishes even further the Ammonite territory to be conquered by David. The conquest of Ammon was a real conquest, and a real subjugation—

perhaps the only one of its kind in all of David's reign. But it was hardly a major expansion, nor was Ammon a major power like the Philistines or the Arameans.

The largest view we can realistically maintain of David's kingdom, then, is not very different from what it was at the beginning of David's reign. It could hardly be called an empire—it was no stronger than the Philistine and Aramean peoples to its west and north. And compared with Egypt and Mesopotamia, it remained a virtual nonentity—note that David is never said to have had any diplomatic contact with either of those two great superpowers at any time during his reign, nor is there any record from those civilizations of David's reign. Israel under David remained what it had always been: a minor state, largely confined to the central hill country of Judah and Israel.

The current area of the modern state of Israel, small though it may be, is in fact perhaps larger than that of David's Israel. Certainly the coastal plain, almost all the way up to Jaffa, would not have been under David's control. On the other hand, the West Bank would have been David's heartland, even extending a little into what is now Jordan. But the Davidic empire of tradition, stretching from the border of Egypt up to the Euphrates, is a gross exaggeration. The biblical account is propagandistic, and that propaganda has been accepted as fact for thousands of years.

To give David credit where it is due, however, simply maintaining the newly expanded borders of his kingdom was achievement enough. He left a territory secure enough that it could endure, at least for the most part, for many generations. For a small kingdom with few natural resources at its disposal, a widely scattered populace, and no tradition of statehood, this is impressive. But it is not the Davidic empire of tradition. Such an empire never existed.

## CHAPTER 6

### *David Under Attack*

#### DESPERATE TIMES CALL FOR DESPERATE MEASURES

THE POPULAR DEPICTION OF DAVID'S reign as gloriously successful is based largely on the memories of David preserved by later biblical authors. Those who wrote the books of Kings established David as the ruler against whom all others were judged. Those who wrote the books of Chronicles whitewashed David's story to remove all traces of embarrassment or potential wrongdoing. But in the earliest material in the books of Samuel, even as the authors try to glorify David at every turn, they are forced, by virtue of their proximity to the historical events, to reckon with reality. The events that truly could be described as glorious—the capture of Jerusalem, the entrance of the ark into the city, and David's victories against the neighboring nations—are narrated in only two chapters of Samuel. Almost the entire rest of the history of David's kingship describes not a glorious reign, but rather a constantly troubled one.

In some respects, it is not surprising that David's reign would not be an easy one. It was hard enough for rightfully chosen kings to maintain their grip on power. How much more difficult for a man who had taken the crown against the popular will and who had in



addition spent years fighting on the side of the enemy, been responsible for the death of the previous and well-liked monarch, and appropriated a national cultic treasure for himself. If anyone knew the dangers of being king, it was David. But even David was unprepared when threats to his kingship came from an unexpected source: his own family.

### *David's Family*

TO UNDERSTAND THE CHALLENGES David would face, we need to be familiar with those closest to him. According to 2 Samuel 3:2–5, David had six sons by six different wives while he reigned in Hebron. His first wife, Ahinoam—the former wife of Saul—bore Amnon, David's firstborn and a significant part of the story to come. His second wife, Abigail—the former wife of the Calebite chief—bore a son named Chileab according to Samuel, but Daniel according to Chronicles.<sup>1</sup> The discrepancy in the son's name is curious, but ultimately irrelevant, for neither Abigail nor her son is ever mentioned again. This may seem odd: after all, an entire chapter was devoted to the story of how Abigail became David's wife. Yet her absence from the rest of the narrative is telling. As suggested above, this marriage had nothing to do with love and everything to do with replacing Nabal as chief of the Calebites. Once David had become king of Judah, Abigail and her offspring were of no use to him. Her job was done.<sup>2</sup>

It is possible, even probable, that David's first two sons were born not in Hebron as the Bible says, but before David had become king in Judah. David had been married to both Ahinoam and Abigail for more than a year and a half before going to Hebron, and it seems unlikely that he would have waited to have children with them. In the case of Ahinoam, it is even possible that her son, Amnon, was conceived with David when she was still Saul's wife. The biblical authors, however, would not have been pleased with the idea that David's sons

were born in Philistia, as this would make them practically foreigners. The authors have probably condensed the chronology of the births, at least for the first two sons.

David's third son was Absalom, the central figure in the coming narrative. His mother, we are told, was Maacah, the daughter of King Talmai of Geshur. Geshur was an independent territory to the north-east of Israel, just to the east of the Sea of Galilee.<sup>3</sup> According to the conquest narrative in the book of Joshua, Geshur was one of the regions that the Israelites were unable to dispossess, thus explaining the Geshurites' continuing presence on the borders of Israel (Josh. 13:13). We are never told when or how David came to marry the princess of Geshur, but given the standards of the time, we can make an educated guess. As noted above, marriages between royal houses were common in the ancient Near East as a way of cementing diplomatic relations between nations. It therefore seems improbable that David should have married the daughter of the king of Geshur before he took the throne in Hebron, as the Geshurites would have had little to gain from an alliance with a mere Philistine mercenary. We can thus date David's marriage to Maacah at least to the Hebron period, though we may not be able to be more precise than that.<sup>4</sup> The marriage itself demonstrates that David was seen from the outside as a legitimate ruler, and one secure enough on the throne to warrant diplomatic ties. As Geshur was supposedly part of Ishbaal's kingdom, David's connection to it also was probably intended to weaken Ishbaal politically in advance of David's seizing the northern throne.<sup>5</sup>

Of David's remaining sons listed in 2 Samuel 3, only the fourth, Adonijah son of Haggith, plays any further role in the story—though not until the very end. Shephatiah son of Abital, and Ithream son of Eglah, the fifth and sixth sons, never appear by name again. In this regard they are like the eleven sons said to be born to David once he became king in Jerusalem, listed in 2 Samuel 5, only one of whom is known to us: Solomon. What about Solomon? We will treat David's successor fully in the next chapter. After he is born in 2 Samuel 12, he disappears from the narrative until the beginning of the first book

of Kings. It is there, at the end of David's life, that Solomon's story, including his birth, is properly told.

One other figure is prominently missing from the list of David's family presented here: Michal, the daughter of Saul whom David commanded to be brought to him when he became king in Hebron. Why isn't she mentioned? Second Samuel 3 preserves a list of David's sons—and Michal had no children with him. The biblical authors created an explanation for this: when David brought the ark into Jerusalem, Michal was embarrassed by David's dancing, during which he evidently "exposed himself" in front of everyone. As a result of her verbal abuse, the text tells us, "to her dying day Michal daughter of Saul had no children" (2 Sam. 6:23). The Bible implies that this was divine punishment for Michal's behavior. But there is a far simpler explanation. David took Michal as his wife as a show of strength, to demonstrate his power over even the royal family of the weakened northern kingdom. Being married to Saul's daughter was also further justification for David's rule in Israel, as it placed him in the legitimate line of succession. As was the case with Abigail, this was a marriage purely of political convenience. Having Michal as a wife served a clear purpose for David. Having children with her, however, did not. In fact, it would have been against David's interests because Michal was a descendant of Saul, and any offspring she had with David would continue Saul's line into the next generation.<sup>6</sup> As we have seen, David did everything possible to destroy Saul's lineage, so having children with Michal would run counter to his program of eradicating the Saulide legacy.

There is another reason to believe that David probably never even slept with Michal, much less had children with her. He was already married to, and had a son with, Michal's mother: Ahinoam. In Leviticus we read, "Do not uncover the nakedness of a woman and her daughter" (18:17). Though this law was written well after David's time, and though David was not one to adhere strictly to the law in any case, it is a reasonable guess that it reflects a cultural norm in ancient Israel, a known abhorrence of such semi-incestual relation-

ships.<sup>7</sup> Just as today we need no law proscribing such an arrangement, it is likely that even David would have recognized that sleeping with both Ahinoam and Michal was forbidden. But it may not have even entered David's mind to do so. He married Michal not for her potential offspring, but for her political utility. And, like Abigail, once she serves her purpose, she disappears from the story.

The cases of Abigail and Michal remind us that David's familial relationships were fundamentally political in nature.<sup>8</sup> He married to gain the kingship, in Judah and in Israel. It was not only his wives who had political importance, however. David's sons were lined up to succeed him on the throne: first Amnon, then Absalom. And the question of succession would be the driving force behind the most significant challenge David faced while king—one that would, in fact, temporarily force him off the throne.

### *Amnon and Tamar*

THIS STORY BEGINS WITH the narrative of Amnon and Tamar, the sister of Absalom.<sup>9</sup> Amnon, the story goes, became infatuated with his half-sister. His cousin Jonadab, in a misguided effort to improve Amnon's mood, suggested that Amnon pretend to be sick and ask that Tamar bring him some food. So Amnon did, requesting that David send Tamar to him, and so she went to Amnon's bedside. After she had prepared the meal, however, Amnon sent everyone out of the room. When Tamar brought the food close to him, he grabbed her and demanded that she sleep with him. Tamar pleaded with her half-brother, even suggesting that if he just asked David for her hand in marriage, he could have her—but to no avail. Amnon raped her. Afterward, he no longer desired her; in fact, he loathed her and ordered her to leave. Again she pleaded with him, that the shame this would bring upon her would be unbearable, but again to no avail. She was forced from his chambers, screaming and tearing her garment in dismay. She encountered her brother Absalom, who immediately

discerned what had happened but told her to keep it quiet for the moment. David also heard about it and was upset, but did nothing. Absalom said nothing to Amnon, but hated him for having violated Tamar.

Such is the biblical account. In assessing its historical veracity, we must begin by noting that, as with many other parts of the David story, the events described here are fundamentally private in nature. The story could be told only by one of the participants, for no one else was privy to what happened in Amnon's bedroom. This alone is cause for doubt.

More striking, however, is the way that elements of this story find parallels in other biblical narratives of sexual misconduct, particularly those from the semimythical patriarchal era. There are two well-known women named Tamar in the Bible: David's daughter, and the daughter-in-law of Judah, whose story is told in Genesis 38. Both stories revolve around the question of sexual propriety within a family. Both stories have an element of deception: Amnon's faked illness, and Tamar's disguising herself as a prostitute. Both Tamars are treated callously by the men around them. And both are connected with David: the Tamar of Genesis bears Judah twins, one of whom, Perez, was traditionally believed to be David's direct ancestor.<sup>10</sup>

There are resonances also with the story of Joseph and his Egyptian master's wife from Genesis 39. Both stories feature infatuation that turns into sexual aggression, in both cases specifically when no one else is present. In both stories the infatuation eventually turns to revulsion and leads to the debasement of the victim. In both a garment plays an evidentiary role: Absalom recognizes that Tamar has been raped by her torn garment, and the Egyptian's wife holds Joseph's garment up as proof that he had tried to rape her.<sup>11</sup>

The closest parallel to the story of Amnon and Tamar, however, is the narrative of Dinah in Genesis 34. Both the Tamar and Dinah stories are, most obviously, about rape. In both the brother(s) of the victim is given the lead role in responding—both Jacob and David, the fathers, are mysteriously passive, even though they are fully aware

of what has transpired. Both stories address the issue of marriage—Amnon refuses Tamar's proposal, and Jacob's sons offer a disingenuous proposal to Shechem.<sup>12</sup>

The similarities between the story of Amnon and Tamar and these three chapters from Genesis strongly suggest that what we have in 2 Samuel 13 is not a historical account, but rather a mixture of older traditional stories. In short, the narrative seems to be a literary creation.<sup>13</sup> There is no reason to believe that Amnon ever raped Tamar—in fact, there is no reason to believe that David actually ever had a daughter named Tamar at all. What the story seeks to establish is a reason for Absalom to hate Amnon, for that hatred appears to be the motivating factor behind what happened next.

### *Amnon's Death*

IN THE SPRING, ABSALOM threw a party, a festival to celebrate the annual sheep-shearing. Exactly when this took place is unclear—the Bible says that it was two years after the rape of Tamar, but dating events on the basis of fictional stories is, needless to say, a risky proposition. Whenever it happened, Absalom invited David, who excused himself; he then asked David whether Amnon could attend, and after some reticence on David's part, the king relented. So Amnon joined Absalom at Baal-hazor, a town a few miles north of Jerusalem. Absalom instructed his servants: "When Amnon is merry with wine, and I tell you to strike down Amnon, kill him! Don't be afraid, for I myself command you" (2 Sam. 13:28). His servants dutifully obeyed and killed Amnon. Thereafter, David heard a false report that Absalom had actually killed all of David's sons. This, we are told, devastated him, but Jonadab, his nephew, assured him that Amnon alone had died and that this was Absalom's revenge for the rape of Tamar.

If we accept that the story of Tamar and Amnon was a literary invention, then Jonadab's rationale for the murder of Amnon can't be true. But without it, the question is glaring: why did Absalom

Tamar  
date  
palm  
date  
well

kill Ammon? The answer is obvious: because with his half-brother Ammon gone, Absalom would be next in line for the throne. If this seems an unthinkable crime, consider that in 2 Chronicles we are told that Jehoram, a ninth-century BCE king of Judah, killed all of his brothers upon taking the throne—and this even when Jehoram was already king (21:4). If Jehoram could kill his brothers only because of the potential threat that they posed to his rule, it is not so difficult to imagine that Absalom might have killed Ammon to move up in the line of succession. Absalom may not have felt especially close to Ammon in the first place—they were only half-brothers and likely did not know each other particularly well, as they would have been raised apart by their mothers. To Absalom, Ammon may have been a virtual stranger—but he was standing in Absalom's way.

The more pressing question from our perspective has to do, as always, with David's involvement. The biblical narrative goes to some lengths to make clear that David was ignorant of everything. We are told, somewhat unnecessarily from a narrative perspective, that David did not attend the sheep-shearing party—in other words, he was (as usual) not present for the murder. We are also told, equally unnecessarily, that he had to be persuaded to let Ammon go to the party—in other words, David tried (albeit unknowingly) to protect Ammon. We are told that David initially thought all the princes had died at Absalom's hand, which is narratively useless, as this mistaken impression is immediately corrected and never comes up again—in other words, David was so ignorant of what was happening that he actually got the facts mixed up. Every aspect of this narrative that has to do with David points toward the conclusion that David had nothing to do with Amnon's death. But none of these elements is necessary for the story—which suggests that they are included precisely to lead the reader to that conclusion. And that, in turn, suggests that exactly the opposite is the case. If the Bible tries so strenuously to persuade us that David wasn't involved in Amnon's death—just as it did with the deaths of Nabal, Saul, Jonathan, Abner, and Saul's remaining descendants—then we must reckon with the possibility that, in fact, he was.

But why would David want Ammon, his firstborn son, dead? It is helpful to ask the question in political terms: why would David not want Ammon to succeed him on the throne? The answer has less to do with Ammon, and more to do with his mother: Ahinoam. Ammon was the product of David's failed coup, his sleeping with Saul's wife. At the time, this had been a necessary step, even if it turned out badly. But now that David had secured the kingship over all Israel, Ammon was yet another link to the Saulide legacy. David had done everything possible to ensure that no one with any connection to Saul would ever threaten his kingship—and yet the one person in the country with a rightful claim to succeed David was none other than the child of Saul's wife. There is no reason to think that David had any affection for Ahinoam—like Abigail and Michal, she was a pawn in his political game—and, hard though it may be to imagine, there is no reason that David would have had any special affection for Ahinoam's son, either. Ammon was a living reminder that David had taken the kingship by force.

We need not doubt that it was really Absalom who killed Amnon. As we have seen, he too had his reasons for wanting Amnon dead. But David must have been involved as well. What seems most probable is that he and Absalom conspired to have Amnon killed. David could have played on Absalom's desire for the throne. He probably made a deal with Absalom: if Absalom had Amnon killed, David would promise Absalom the right to succeed him on the throne.<sup>14</sup> Absalom, after all, was no descendant of Saul but the product of a legitimate royal marriage between David and the daughter of the king of Geshur—indeed, this was the first legitimate marriage David had participated in, after Ahinoam and Abigail; it was the first marriage David entered into when he was a king. Absalom would have been, in David's mind, a legitimate and desirable successor.

Thus a conspiracy between David and Absalom to have Amnon killed served everyone's interests—except Amnon's. David could eliminate the last vestiges of Saul's line and ensure that his preferred son would succeed him; Absalom could overcome the disadvantage of

his birth order and attain the royal status held by both his father and mother. Amnon died for no fault of his own; once the Tamar story is debunked, there is nothing to suggest that he deserved his fate. But he was born to the wrong mother, and he died for it at the hands of his father and his half-brother.

### *Absalom's Flight*

AFTER THE MURDER OF Amnon, Absalom fled to the territory of Geshur for three years. At first glance, this looks like an admission of guilt, as if Absalom were afraid of David's retribution. In reality, his flight was a necessary part of the conspiracy. He hardly could just return to Jerusalem and resume his life as it had been before—if he did, everyone would understand that David condoned Amnon's murder. If Absalom returned, David would be forced to punish him, probably with death. The two conspirators required a mechanism by which Absalom would be "punished" but eventually regain his position in the court. A false exile would serve this purpose well: Absalom could be understood as having been forced out of the country but could, in time, be allowed to return.

It is no coincidence that Absalom should have fled to Geshur. He would not be safe anywhere in Israel because everyone would have known that he had committed fratricide. Most foreign nations would have no use for a runaway Israelite prince. But Geshur was sure to take him in, for Absalom's mother was the daughter of the king of Geshur. Absalom fled from his father into the arms of his grandfather. The situation was perfect for everyone involved. Absalom would be safe, and David would know it. David would also have a ready-made excuse for why he was unable to capture Absalom and bring him to justice: he was being sheltered by his family in an independent foreign kingdom.

The biblical story of Absalom's return from Geshur to Jerusalem is somewhat convoluted. Joab, David's general, sets the story in

motion when he tricks David with the help of the famous wise woman of Tekoa. This woman disguises herself as a mourning mother and comes to David with a tale: one of her sons killed the other, and now her clan is demanding that the killer be put to death, even though this would wipe out the only remnant of her husband's name. David's response is just what Joab expected: he promises that the woman's son will return to her safely. At this, the woman pulls back the curtain, telling David that he is guilty of the same crime, depriving himself of his own son and elevating legal principles over paternal love. David immediately suspects Joab, and the woman confirms it. David agrees to let his son return and sends Joab to fetch Absalom from Geshur. But David instructs Joab to have Absalom go straight to his own house, and not come to David. After two more years, David finally relents and brings Absalom to the palace, where they embrace.

The story of the wise woman from Tekoa—another private conversation, complete with a parable—is fictional. The question is why it would be necessary for the authors to invent such an elaborate account. Why not simply present David as having a change of heart? As is the case with so many of these overly involved biblical narratives, the story serves to obscure the historical truth. It is a continuation of the cover-up of the David and Absalom conspiracy. David must be seen as disinclined ever to forgive Absalom in order to persuade the reader that he had no hand in Amnon's death. It is only in a display of royal beneficence to the woman of Tekoa that David unwittingly acquiesces to Absalom's return. In other words, David did not want to see Absalom again, the story tells us, but he was such a deeply good person that he allowed the wise woman to force his hand. The typical biblical program of elevating David while covering his tracks is evident.

The same agenda is at work in the prominent role Joab plays in the story. David, we are to understand, would never on his own have taken the initiative in welcoming Absalom back. It is Joab who wants Absalom to return, not David. It is Joab who goes to fetch Absalom, not David. Everything that David wanted in reality is ascribed by the

biblical authors to Joab. The two further years that Absalom spent without coming to see David are the final piece of the cover-up, yet another indication that David was deeply reticent about Absalom regaining his position in Jerusalem. Probably this was all worked out well in advance. It was the price Absalom and David had to pay for their determination to eliminate Amnon: five years of separation, of exile and virtual house arrest for Absalom. In the long run, this seemed a fair price to pay for getting the right son on the throne.

### *Absalom's Revolt*

DAVID HAD EXECUTED HIS plan perfectly. In fact, since his early failed attempt to seize Saul's crown, David had experienced an unbroken string of successes. What happened next, however, was unexpected and marked the beginning of his long decline.

The Bible tells us that Absalom was exceedingly attractive—that “no one in Israel was so praised for his beauty as Absalom; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head he was without blemish” (2 Sam. 14:25). What's more, he had a remarkable head of hair. Physical descriptions of biblical characters are rare and always meaningful. What is the purpose of describing Absalom this way? Physical gifts went beyond mere appearance; they were seen as a sign of divine favor. Joseph is described as handsome. The infant Moses is beautiful. In the right circumstances, one could be considered fit to be a king if one only looked the part: Saul, we may recall, was chosen because he was taller than everyone else; David himself is described as handsome. Absalom's appearance may have planted in him and in others the thought that he was particularly fit to be king. At the very least, the biblical authors provide this information as foreshadowing for Absalom's subsequent actions.

Absalom, some time after David had welcomed him back into his arms, “provided himself with a chariot, horses, and fifty men to run before him” (2 Sam. 15:1). The import of this may be lost on the con-

temporary reader, but it would have been very apparent to the ancient Israelite audience. Chariots and horses were distinctly royal possessions. In fact, they are almost always associated in the Bible with foreign kings: Pharaoh in pursuit of the Israelites after the Exodus; the coalition of Canaanite kings who engage Joshua in battle; the Philistines who confront Saul early in his reign; and again at Mount Gilboa; the Arameans whom David defeats in the battle against Ammon; and others.<sup>15</sup> Solomon, famous for his wealth, is said to have had thousands of chariots and horses. These were so strongly associated with kingship that they are the first item in Samuel's list of reasons why Israel will be unhappy with a king: “He will take your sons and appoint them as his charioteers and horsemen, and to run before his chariots” (1 Sam. 8:11). Absalom, in other words, has begun accumulating the trappings of kingship.

Absalom took one further step toward the kingship. He would go to the city gates and meet those who came there to plead a judicial case. In Israel, the city gate was the traditional locus for judicial proceedings.<sup>16</sup> The city elders would sit on benches by the gate, those with a case would come before them to have it heard, and the elders would render judgment.<sup>17</sup> But ultimately, justice was the responsibility of the king. This was a common understanding throughout the ancient Near East. It is the principle behind the famous Mesopotamian legal code of Hammurabi, which begins by explaining that the gods had chosen Hammurabi from among all men “to make justice prevail in the land, to abolish the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak.”<sup>18</sup> The same sentiment is found in 2 Samuel 8, at the conclusion of the record of David's victories: “David executed true justice among all his people” (8:15).

Absalom, however, seems to have felt that David's justice was not quite good enough, that David was neglecting his judicial responsibilities.<sup>19</sup> He would say to everyone who appeared at the gate with a case, “there is no one assigned to you by the king to hear it” (2 Sam. 15:3). But he went further, not only denigrating David, but suggesting that he, Absalom, could do better: “If only I were appointed judge

in the land”—that is, king—“and everyone with a suit or a claim came before me, I would rule in his favor” (15:4). Absalom played on what must have been a popular sentiment that David was ignoring his subjects. Just in case this wasn’t convincing enough, however, Absalom also effectively promised everyone who showed up that he would decide in their favor: “It is clear that your claim is good and right” (15:3), he said to each person. He did not allow people to bow to him—instead, he embraced and kissed them. In this way, the Bible says, “Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel” (15:6).

After four years of building up his image among the Israelite populace, Absalom made his final move. He told David that, when he was in exile in Geshur, he had made a vow to worship Yahweh if he ever returned, and now he wanted to fulfill that vow in Hebron. David, in a sure sign that he had no inkling what was going on, permitted Absalom to go. Had David had any idea that Absalom was planning a coup, he hardly would have allowed the prince to go to Hebron, of all places—the very city where David himself claimed the kingship. Sure enough, Absalom sent word to all the tribes of Israel, announcing that he had become king in Hebron. The Bible tells us that “the conspiracy gained strength, and the people supported Absalom in increasing numbers” (2 Sam. 15:12).

That Absalom was able to amass enough popular support to declare himself king is a clear indication that David was unprepared for the insurrection.<sup>20</sup> David had proved himself to have a remarkable gift for reading the political winds and riding them to success after success. Undoubtedly, he thought that he had settled the issue of his succession by making a deal with Absalom at Amnon’s expense. He would have had no reason to suspect that Absalom would be impatient. We should also be surprised, because no rationale is provided in the biblical narrative for why Absalom decided to stage a coup. What motivated him to take such a bold step? Perhaps he was irritated at having had to wait five years to return to his former position. Perhaps he realized that a man who could have his firstborn son murdered was not the most trustworthy of co-conspirators. Perhaps he thought that

he would be relatively old by the time he gained the throne, should David have a long life. But perhaps the simplest answer is that shown by the course of events: Absalom declared himself king because he could. The real question is why Absalom was successful.

For all of the praise that the biblical authors and subsequent tradition lavish on David, the main accomplishment that the Bible attributes to him as king is the conquest of foreign nations in 2 Samuel 8. Although their claims are exaggerated, as we have seen, they are not to be dismissed—David was undoubtedly a fine military leader. But if expanding Israel’s territory was worthwhile from a royal perspective, from the standpoint of the people David was not so admirable. He had claimed power by force in both Judah and Israel—in Judah disrupting the long-established independence of the various clans, and in Israel destroying the only royal line the people had ever known. He had seized the ark, a popular cultic symbol, and appropriated it for himself and his new capital. Military victories may have added to the nation’s glory, but most Israelites, farmers and shepherds for generations, hardly would have cared much. What was important to them was that their traditional way of life be preserved. They placed a high value on military protection; they were much less interested in military conquest.<sup>21</sup> David had a vision for himself and the nation, but it was not one that played well in the hinterland.

What Absalom promised was a return to the “good old days”—to the way things had been before David changed everything.<sup>22</sup> This is the symbolic import of Absalom’s promise to restore justice at the city gates. His revolt was a populist movement, and David was anything but a populist. Absalom also may have represented for the Israelite people a chance to have a king of their own choosing again. Even though he was a son of David, he could be *their* son of David, a king acclaimed by the people, as Saul had been, and as David had not.<sup>23</sup>

For the biblical authors, of course, the impression that David’s subjects did not love him or that his behavior on the throne in any way justified Absalom’s rebellion would have been unpalatable. They had tried to establish just the opposite throughout the account of

David's life. How, then, could they deal with the indisputable fact of Absalom's uprising? If God had placed David on the throne, then only God should have been able to remove him from it. And so the authors claim. They found one crime in David's life that they could admit really happened: his affair with Bathsheba and murder of her husband Uriah (to which we will return at length in the next chapter). Of all David's sins, this one was perhaps the least objectionable. Although a man died, that death was ostensibly a result of David's all-too-human lust. And in the end, David's affair with Bathsheba led to the birth of Solomon. In short, this was a place where the biblical authors could accept a depiction of David as less than perfect—and it gave them an opportunity to explain Absalom's revolt. For when the prophet Nathan confronts David after Uriah's death, the punishment he lays on David is none other than this: "I will make evil rise against you from within your own house" (2 Sam. 12:11). Absalom's rebellion is divine retribution, and even as David is punished for one sin, he is absolved of having been hated by his subjects or of having been deficient in any way as a king.

### *David's Flight*

DAVID MAY NOT HAVE seen Absalom's actions coming, but he knew a successful coup when he saw one—he still knew how to read the political winds. Upon hearing the news of Absalom's self-coronation, David realized that he had no choice. He and his entire court packed up and fled the capital, leaving behind only ten concubines "to mind the palace" (2 Sam. 15:16).<sup>24</sup> David stopped at the edge of the city and watched as those who remained loyal to him paraded past—not in victory, but in flight. He greeted his courtiers, his bodyguards the Cherethites and Pelethites, and the six hundred Philistines under the command of Ittai who had been with him since his days in Ziklag. When David's priests showed up bearing the ark, however, David turned them back. The Bible presents this as an act of faith, of David

not wanting to remove the ark from its rightful home. In fact, however, in Zadok and Abiathar David had two perfect spies: men who were faithful to him but who had every reason to remain in Jerusalem to tend to the cult.

To his priests David added one more crucial loyal servant to serve as a spy: his advisor Hushai. Across the ancient Near East, kings relied on a retinue of advisors, usually men of an older generation, who counseled the monarch on all matters related to the royal administration.<sup>25</sup> The word of a trusted advisor was taken with the ultimate seriousness. If David could plant a high-ranking advisor in Absalom's court, one whose advice would be to David's advantage, the rewards could be enormous. Thus Hushai was instructed to present himself to Absalom as having defected from David. Hushai's undercover work on David's behalf was especially necessary because, much to David's chagrin, another of his well-respected wise men had authentically gone over to Absalom's side: a man named Ahitophel. With his best men remaining in the city as spies, and with his loyal militia at his side, David crossed the valley to the east of Jerusalem to enter, once again, the wilderness of Judah.

In one fell swoop everything that David had built was torn down. He had abandoned the capital that he had conquered and established, and with it the kingship that he had fought so hard for so long to attain. He was right back where he had started. David had experienced two coups in his life: his own against Saul, and his son Absalom's against himself. Both ended with David fleeing into the wilderness, which, as before, was a refuge for those on the run from the authorities. It must have been shocking to David to realize that he was no longer that authority. He had fallen from the greatest heights any Israelite had ever known. By entering the wilderness, David recognized that, for the first time in many years, he was powerless.

This sensation was driven home by the sudden appearance of a man named Shimei in a small village to the east of Jerusalem. Shimei threw stones at David and his men, shouting at him, "Yahweh is returning upon you all the blood of the House of Saul, in whose place



you rule” (2 Sam. 16:8). As David and his men continued to walk, Shimei continued to insult him and throw stones and dirt. The David of old hardly would have tolerated such outrageous behavior, as his warrior Abishai reminded him: “Why let that dead dog curse my lord the king?” (16:9). But David understood that he was in no position to fight back. The people had turned against him, and Shimei was merely their mouthpiece. David had been rejected, but the focus for the moment was on the rise of the new king, Absalom. To kill Shimei would be to arouse the wrath of the nation against David—far better to take the abuse and flee in relative safety.

Shimei’s insults do more than prove David’s powerlessness. They also confirm for us David’s role in the deaths of Saul and his descendants. Shimei’s speech is the historical truth that the biblical authors have tried to counter. That his words have been preserved even by these same authors is explainable by the situation: unlike many of the stories and conversations that we have identified as apocryphal, Shimei leveled his charges against David publicly, and therefore undeniably. Shimei says what everyone must have known and been thinking for all of these years: that David had no right to the throne, that he had murdered Saul and all the other Saulides in cold blood to achieve the kingship. It is no wonder that the people sided with Absalom. Anyone was preferable to David, against whom they had harbored a deep-seated hatred every moment that he sat on the throne.

As David leaves Jerusalem for the wilderness, Absalom arrives in the capital to formally take up his new kingship over Israel. The first man he encounters is Hushai, David’s trusted advisor and spy. Hushai acclaims Absalom as king, but Absalom is rightfully wary. Hushai convinces him, however: “I am for the one whom Yahweh and this people and all the men of Israel have chosen” (2 Sam. 16:18). This speech is telling. David is also said to have been chosen by Yahweh to rule, but nowhere is it said that the *people* of Israel chose David as their king. This is the difference between Absalom’s kingship and David’s—this is why Absalom’s coup was a success. The people’s voice was heard, for the first time since David went to Hebron. And Hushai’s speech

was convincing, for Absalom allowed him to remain in Jerusalem as one of his counselors.

The final act of Absalom’s coup was one that we will recognize. Absalom slept with the concubines whom David had left behind in the palace, in fulfillment of the second part of Nathan’s punishment for David’s affair with Bathsheba: “I will take your wives and give them to another man before your very eyes and he shall sleep with your wives under this very sun” (2 Sam. 12:11). What David had tried and failed at in his coup against Saul, Absalom accomplished with ease. David’s downfall was complete: the entire nation now knew that David’s power had vanished, and Absalom was the unquestioned monarch.

Absalom was truly his father’s son. Like David, he knew precisely how to go about achieving his desired results. Just as David had slowly gathered power, taking a series of well-calculated steps to become king, so too Absalom: his chariots and horses, his promises of justice, his call to the populace to join him—all were thought out and executed over a matter of years. David initially had been impatient and had suffered for it at the hands of Saul. Absalom did not make the same mistake. He had all of his father’s political gifts—including unvarnished ambition—and added to them a sensitivity to the desires of the people who would be his subjects. The combination was unstoppable.

### *Absalom’s Downfall*

ONLY ONE THING was left for Absalom to do to cement his place on the throne. He had to kill David. As David knew when he murdered Saul’s descendants, it was impossible to rule in security when another legitimate claimant for the kingship was still alive. Eliminating David was the only way for Absalom to be certain that his father would not one day try to take back the throne. And Absalom could be sure that David would not rest until he had regained control—David had al-

ready invested too much in gaining the kingship to let it go so easily.

Considering David's state—with only a few hundred men by his side, all weary from flight—capturing and killing him should not have been a particularly difficult task. Absalom had the resources to pursue David. A quick strike with overwhelming force—an ancient campaign of shock and awe—and David's men would be unable to resist. This, in fact, seems to be precisely what Ahitophel, Absalom's chief advisor, recommended. Ahitophel even offered to lead the charge in Absalom's stead, guaranteeing David's death at his own hands.

But Absalom wavered—once, and fatally—asking to hear also from Hushai, David's former counselor. And here David's sole advantage over Absalom—his web of loyal servants, those who had been with him and benefited from his patronage for so many years—came into play. Hushai was left behind for this exact reason: to provide Absalom with harmful advice. And Hushai played his part beautifully. The plan he suggested sounded perfectly reasonable: remembering that David was at his best in the wilderness, he said, it would be safer to call up troops from all the tribes, as many as possible, and attack him in an orderly fashion, leaving (in theory) no room for error. There was only one catch: if the tribes were all to be mustered for war, then their new commander in chief would have to march at their head.

There were many reasons for Absalom to like Hushai's plan. He could take up the traditional royal role of military leader. He could physically stand before his people as their king. And he could personally ensure that David was really dead. Hushai's argument was convincing, but in accepting it, Absalom sealed his fate.

With Hushai's plan in place, David's spy network went into action. Hushai passed the word to David's priests, Zadok and Abiathar, who passed it on to a slave girl, who relayed it to Zadok and Abiathar's sons, Ahimaz and Jonathan, respectively. These latter two were staying at a spring just outside the eastern walls of the City of David, and they ran the news to David in the wilderness. The instructions they gave David were clear: David had to get out of the wilderness and across the Jordan. So David did, arriving at the city of Mahanaim.

Why did David have to cross the Jordan? Under Hushai's plan, he would be pursued not only by a selection of troops, but by the amassed forces of all the Israelite tribes. This would include Judah, the territory in which David was hiding. Nowhere in Israel, even the wilderness, would be safe. And further, with so many troops set to take the field, David would need a place to regroup and resupply. We remember that the one significant non-Israelite territory that David had authentically managed to subjugate was to the east, across the Jordan. It was to these vassals that David went, and they dutifully supplied him and his men with food and a place to rest. This may, however, have had less to do with their treaty obligations to David—after all, he was no longer king—and rather more to do with the fact that he and hundreds of his best soldiers had just arrived at their door requesting provisions.<sup>26</sup> Whatever the reason, the Transjordanian supplies probably made a significant difference. And, more important, David's move across the Jordan shifted the field of battle out of Israel and into a terrain that David knew better than anyone.

The battle is described very briefly in the Bible. David split his men into three divisions: one under Joab; one under Abishai, Joab's brother; and one under Ittai the Philistine. David himself remained away from the field of battle for his safety (as Absalom, in his pride, did not). Absalom and his forces, the army assembled from the various Israelite tribes as per Hushai's advice, engaged David's men. Much of David's military success, starting back in his days as an officer under Saul, was predicated on the advantages he gained from the terrain, and this battle was no different. The two sides met in the forest of Mahanaim. It is difficult enough for a regular trained military company to maintain order and position when fighting in the woods. Absalom's army—a patchwork of men convened from the various Israelite tribes, virtually none of whom had any battle experience or practice fighting alongside one another—was undone by the landscape. David's men, by contrast, were well trained, had fought together for years, and had experience particularly in the hills and forests of both Judah and the Transjordan. The biblical authors put

it apply: “the forest consumed more troops that day than the sword” (2 Sam. 18:8).

There is something symbolic about David’s victory in Mahanaim. Absalom’s rebellion was grounded in a popular appeal, a promise to return Israel to its old ways before David. Yet when it came to military matters, this battle proved that the old ways, of each tribe contributing men to fight together against a common cause, were no match for the royal militia of the centralized monarchy. If Absalom’s revolt pitted populism against elitism, it was the elite who came out on top.

As for Absalom, the biblical description of his death is highly literary. We are told that his hair got caught in a branch, and when his mule rode out from under him he was left hanging in midair. It was while Absalom was in this very unroyal position that Joab supposedly came upon him and stabbed him in the chest, after which ten of Joab’s men hacked him to death, threw his corpse into a pit, and covered the pit with stones. The last part of the story—Absalom’s death and ignominious burial—seems plausible enough. But the dangling in midair by his hair is the biblical authors’ way of communicating Absalom’s comeuppance: his beauty, which, it is implied, had something to do with his popularity and perhaps desire for the throne, was the very thing that ended up causing his death. This is a morality lesson, not a history lesson. Exactly how Absalom died is unknowable, but it is as likely as not that Joab personally made sure that Absalom perished.

David’s reaction to hearing the news of Absalom’s death is among the most famous parts of the biblical story: “My son Absalom! O my son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you! O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Sam. 19:1). No reader, especially one with children, can help but be moved by David’s cries. This is perhaps the emotional high-water mark of the entire Bible, among the most authentic representations of grief in all ancient literature. And in its emotional authenticity, it rings true. After all, David really did want Absalom to succeed him, he was truly shocked by Absalom’s revolt, and thus he very well may have been devastated by the news of Absalom’s death.

Yet David surely knew that one of them, either he or his son, would die as a result of this battle. David understood why Absalom was pursuing him—he knew Absalom could not allow him to live. But by the very same logic, if David were ever to reclaim his throne, Absalom had to be eliminated. It is therefore curious that the biblical authors maintain otherwise—that David explicitly requested that Absalom not be killed. More telling is the way that they describe this request. David told Joab, Abishai, and Ittai, his three generals, to “deal gently for my sake with the boy, with Absalom” (2 Sam. 18:5). Crucially, “all the people heard when the king gave the order about Absalom to all the officers” (18:5). We have seen this type of statement before. It is similar to what the biblical authors say about the death of Abner: “all the people and all Israel knew that it had not been the king’s will to kill Abner son of Ner” (2 Sam. 3:37). When the biblical authors say that everyone in the narrative knows something, what they are really communicating is that we, the audience, should accept it as absolute truth. And, as often happens when the Bible wants to persuade the reader, the point is hammered home. The first man to encounter Absalom hanging by his hair refuses to kill him because of David’s words; the two messengers who bring news of the battle to David are each greeted with the question, “Is my boy Absalom safe?”; David continues crying as the troops return from the combat, “and the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the troops” (2 Sam. 19:3). David is represented as caring virtually nothing for the result of the battle—the battle that would determine his fate, whether he would die or return to the throne—but only about the preservation of Absalom’s life.

David’s mourning continues so long, according to the Bible, that Joab has to intervene and put an end to it. He castigates David for seeming to care more about Absalom than about all of the soldiers who fought so bravely for him and for his kingship. He threatens David, suggesting that if the king refuses to present himself to the troops, they will abandon him. And so David—reluctantly, the Bible implies—stops mourning and stands before his men as victor. This episode is the conclusion of the apology regarding Absalom’s death.

It claims that David was so distraught over his son's demise that he would have been willing to relinquish even the kingship just to grieve. This is moving stuff—but it hardly sounds like the David we have come to know.

Joab's significant involvement in the story should be a clue for us as to what may have been happening. At almost every point where Joab appears, the biblical authors position him as the counter to David's desires. It was not David who wanted Abner dead—it was Joab. And it was not David who killed Abner—it was Joab. It was not David who wanted Absalom to return from exile—it was Joab. And it was not David who brought him back—it was Joab. So too here. It was not David who wanted Absalom dead—it was Joab. And it was not David who recognized the great victory he had won over Absalom—it was Joab. Joab is a central element in the pro-David apology. Historical events that incriminated David were deflected onto Joab. As the biblical authors have David himself say: "those men, the sons of Zeruiah"—Joab's mother—"are too savage for me!" (2 Sam. 3:39). In effect, the authors are saying that David was constitutionally incapable of doing the things it appears that he did; it must have been his cruel general. And yet the authors could do nothing about the fact that Joab not only went unpunished, but remained David's right-hand man throughout his reign.

What this tells us is that in the case of Absalom, despite the high emotion of the episode, the truth is that David ordered Absalom's death. Indeed, he had no other choice. He may well have been saddened by it, and he may well have mourned in his way. But he was responsible.

An intriguing question is why the biblical authors felt the need to persuade us that the opposite was true. After all, it would make perfect sense for David to defend himself, even to the death. There seems to be little here to apologize for. The best guess is that, at the time the biblical authors were writing their David story, substantial pro-Absalom feelings remained among Israel's populace, the audience for the narrative. The thrust of the apology is that David would

have allowed Absalom to live if he could, and, we may assume, to take the throne either in David's place or after him. The biblical authors are proclaiming that the loss of Absalom as Israel's desired king is not to be blamed on David, their actual king. Such a claim would make no sense generations later, when the memory of Absalom, the momentary monarch, had faded in Israel. The Absalom apology thus serves as another indication that the David story should be dated to a time very close to David's own.

Absalom's coup, though a failure, dealt a severe blow to David, as regarded both his power and his image. David had clawed his way to the top, using every possible advantage he could find, destroying lives and traditions without regard or remorse. He controlled the nation as no one had before him. And yet it all came undone, the mighty king forced into the wilderness and then out of the country altogether, in need of foreign assistance to defend himself against his own former subjects. David would return to his throne in Jerusalem, but his reign would never quite be the same.

### *The Aftermath*

THE CHANGE IN DAVID'S power is evident from the immediate aftermath of Absalom's death. The rebel son was dead, and the throne empty—it was David's for the (re)taking. But David remained in Mahanaim. The man who had brought all of Israel to its knees was incapable of returning, for the people who had reluctantly accepted his rule in the past had been empowered by the momentary success of Absalom's revolt. And yet, at least according to the biblical text, the Israelites—the inhabitants of the north—were uncertain of what to do next. David was in exile, Absalom was dead, and the original royal family of Saul had been wiped out—someone had to sit on the throne, someone had to protect them. For if any of Israel's enemies realized that no one was in charge, the nation would be open to easy conquest. Their tribal armies, defeated at Mahanaim, had returned

to their homes and were in no position to be raised again any time soon.<sup>27</sup> David, for all his faults, had successfully protected Israel from the Philistines and the Ammonites, the longtime antagonists of the northern tribes. It seemed that there was little choice. For the north, the fall of Absalom meant a return to David.

Judah was another matter. This had been the heartland of Absalom's rebellion—he had been a Judahite, born and crowned in Hebron, the original capital of Judah under David.<sup>28</sup> The northern and southern tribes were not so deeply intertwined that the decision of one was necessarily that of the other. While the north had effectively acquiesced to David's return to power, David still had to deal with the south. Until the situation in Judah was settled, he would not be able to return to Jerusalem as king.

David had taken control of Judah through diplomacy once; he could do it again. He sent word to his priests, Zadok and Abiathar, who had ostensibly maintained their neutrality throughout the Absalom rebellion by staying with the ark in Jerusalem and who were therefore credible in the eyes of the people. David told them to speak to the elders of Judah, appealing to David's old Judahite origins and requesting that Judah unite to return David to the throne. At the same time, Zadok and Abiathar were known to be two of David's oldest compatriots. To add an extra level of force to his request, David turned to someone who was known not to have any affection for him and whose credibility was therefore unimpeachable: Amasa, Absalom's general.

Amasa is introduced in the Bible for the first time as Absalom's personally appointed army commander. But his lineage is also provided, and it turns out that he is Joab's cousin—and therefore David's nephew. In retrospect, this makes sense. Absalom's coup was from within—as a member of the royal family, he wouldn't have had access to anyone outside David's administration. This is why his main advisor, Ahitophel, was David's former counselor. And it seems more than likely that his general, Amasa, had also been a high-ranking officer in David's military.<sup>29</sup> After all, David's commanders

were, like Saul's, family members. But whatever role Amasa may have played in David's army, he had sacrificed it when he threw his allegiance behind Absalom. It was thus significant that David approached Amasa for support in his return to the throne. And it also required that David give him something in return. So David told Zadok and Abiathar to send a message to Amasa: "Are you not my own flesh and blood? May God do thus and more to me if you do not become my army commander permanently in place of Joab" (2 Sam. 19:14). Although the appeal to kinship ties may have struck Amasa as somewhat disingenuous—David had just had the second of his sons killed—the appeal to Amasa's ego in the offer of Joab's position was no doubt hard to refuse.

Zadok and Abiathar are never said to have fulfilled their mission to the elders of Judah. But Amasa did his job. It no doubt made a major impression to have Absalom's general supporting David. Not only did it indicate that the Absalom establishment had shifted its support to David—which surely helped with the popular perception of David's power—but it also meant, more practically, that Israel's anti-David army was no more. Just as Abner's defection had signaled the end of Ishbaal's ability to fight David, Amasa's defection did the same for Absalom's supporters. Like the army in the north, the army of Judah had dispersed after the defeat at Mahanaim, and now its commander, himself from Judah, had announced his allegiance to David. Judah was hardly in a position to refuse Amasa's overtures on David's behalf. The message from Judah was sent to David: "Come back with all your followers" (2 Sam. 19:15). David had won again.

The royal procession back across the Jordan was both a grand symbolic moment and an opportunity for some individuals to make personal gestures of support—or self-abasement—before the returning king. The first of these was Shimei, the northerner who had hurled stones and insults at David during the flight from Jerusalem. His appearance before David confirms for us that the north had agreed to have David back as king. Shimei therefore had reason to ask for David's forgiveness, now that the man he had tarred as a

murderer was returning to power. David, however, swore not to kill Shimei, much to Abishai's astonishment (again). David's rare show of leniency is readily explained—not as the Bible does, as a display of grace, but rather in simple political terms. David's rule in the north was hanging by a thread, the result not of his great power, but of the Israelites' need for someone, anyone, to protect them. The murder of an Israelite—even before David had made his way to Jerusalem—likely would have incited a fresh wave of resentment. David was in no position to make more enemies now. He had to let Shimei live.

Ziba, Saul's former steward whom David had given control of Meribbal's royal estate, also appeared before the king. He had more personally at stake in David's kingship than most, as he controlled his property (Meribbal's property) entirely by David's word. A new king would have no reason to uphold David's agreement with Ziba. A show of respect and heartfelt welcome was therefore appropriate. But along with Ziba came Meribbal himself, who had more to account for. For Meribbal had not gone into exile with David alongside the rest of the royal court, choosing instead to stay in Jerusalem and await the arrival of Absalom (2 Sam. 16:3). Meribbal's decision may be chalked up to his infirmity—it would have been physically difficult, if not impossible, for him to have made the trek through the wilderness and across the Jordan. But Ziba explained it to David differently: Meribbal, he said, stayed in Jerusalem hoping that, somehow, he might attain the northern kingship that was rightfully his. Meribbal declares Ziba to be a liar, but of course he has every reason to say that. It is possible that Meribbal hoped Absalom might really return things to the way they were before David, including the restoration of an independent northern kingdom of Israel. Absalom would rule in Judah, where his rebellion was centered, and Meribbal, naturally, would rule in the north. As Absalom hardly ruled long enough to effect any changes at all, we will never know what his intentions were—though it is hard to believe that he willingly would have relinquished the command of the north won by his father.<sup>30</sup>

In any case, Meribbal had to explain his stay in Jerusalem, and thus his apparent support for Absalom. All he could do was beg for mercy. David, upon learning that Meribbal would not accompany him, had formally transferred all of Meribbal's estate to Ziba (2 Sam. 16:4). Now that Meribbal was before him asking for forgiveness, David, so the story goes, declared that Meribbal and Ziba would split the royal estate equally between them. This decision seems almost Solomonic, and perhaps it is too neat to be true. The authors want to show David as gracious, but at the same time they must have known that he did not in fact divide Saul's estate but gave it in its entirety to Ziba. Thus they have Meribbal responding to David's division of the property by formally renouncing his claim to it: "Let him take it all, since my lord the king has come home safe" (2 Sam. 19:31).<sup>31</sup> In other words, David did the gracious thing—and if Saul's estate ended up entirely in Ziba's hands, it was Meribbal's own decision. But Meribbal would be allowed to live, for the same reason that Shimei was pardoned. Any Saulide death was politically impossible.

The last person to present himself to the king was Barzillai the Gileadite, who had provided David with supplies during the stay at Mahanaim. He was not obligated to David in any way, nor did he need David's forgiveness. He accompanied him merely as a show of respect, made all the more remarkable by his advanced age. David requested that Barzillai spend his final years in Jerusalem as David's honored guest, but Barzillai refused. Instead, he offered Chimham—most likely Barzillai's son—as one whom David could honor in that way. This was effectively an international treaty between David and Gilead, and one that reaffirmed that it was the Transjordanians who were vassals to David, and not the other way around.

With the formalities out of the way, David and his men continued across the Jordan and back into Israel. At this point the Bible describes a remarkable debate. All the men of Israel, we are told, came to David and complained that Judah had been given the right to invite the king back. The men of Judah replied that David was their kinsman, and they had every right to be the ones to welcome him home. The Is-

raelites responded that, as they had ten tribes, they had ten shares in the kingship, and they claimed that they were the first to suggest that David return at all. In the end, we are told, “the men of Judah spoke more powerfully than the men of Israel” (2 Sam. 19:44). This episode is faintly ridiculous. A dialogue between “the men of Israel” and “the men of Judah” can hardly be taken at face value. The presentation of the north and south bickering over who had more right to honor David has no historical veracity. It serves, rather, to suggest that Israel and Judah were each desperate to bring David back, a notion at odds with the reality: that Israel had no other options and that Judah was, once again, coerced into accepting David as king.

There seemed to be little to prevent David from finally making his way to Jerusalem to resume his reign. One man, however, was displeased by David's return. Before David could even reach his capital, a man named Sheba from the tribe of Benjamin declared Israel's independence: “We have no portion in David, no share in the son of Jesse—every man to his tent, O Israel!” (2 Sam. 20:1). Sheba pointedly used the terminology of kin-based landholding: “portion” and “share.” This language is cleverly doubled-edged. It states that the northern tribes do not consider David's kingship to be an authentic part of their patrimony; at the same time, it reminds the Israelites that David is originally from Judah and is their problem to deal with. The final phrase—“every man to his tent”—has military overtones and signals the dispersal of the army and the return to traditional tribal life.<sup>32</sup>

The Bible presents Sheba as a significant threat to David's kingship in the north. In reality, Sheba was always a lone revolutionary, and in the end a rather pathetic one. Even if he had been able to rouse Israel to rebellion, David had just defeated Israel's army at Mahanaim with only his private royal army. Now that Israel's troops had returned to their homes, they would have to be mustered again to face David's same victorious warriors—but this time without Judah, which had returned its allegiance to David. Sheba's revolt never would have had any chance of success. In the end it hardly mattered, since the

rest of Israel had no idea that Sheba had declared a rebellion on their behalf. Thus when David sought to quash the uprising, he needed to do no more than simply hunt down Sheba. Even this, however, is an indication of how insecure David must have felt his kingship to be. At the height of his power, he would have had nothing to fear from a nobody like Sheba. But his control was so tenuous now that he needed to commit his weary troops to ensure that Sheba's call would go unheeded.

Along with Sheba, David still had one outstanding issue to deal with: Amasa, who, David had promised, would take over for his cousin Joab. If we remember the story of Abner, we can predict how this story will turn out. Amasa may have been family, but he had sided with Absalom against David. Having survived the battle at Mahanaim, he still could be of some momentary use—but once Judah had accepted David as king, Amasa had no further value.

During the pursuit of Sheba, David, we are told, gave Amasa instructions to muster the troops of Judah. This seems a rather bizarre decision. The troops had just returned home; being immediately called up again, this time to fight not against David, but for him, would have been cause for significant resentment.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, David was pursuing a single individual, Sheba—he hardly needed an entire tribal army to chase down one man. To compound matters, David is said to have given Amasa only three days to muster Judah's forces, an impossible task even under the best of conditions. When Amasa was unable to gather his assigned forces in time, according to the narrative, David sent Joab and Abishai with the Cherethites and Pelethites to find Sheba. The two forces, the Judahites under Amasa and David's warriors under Joab, are said to have converged in Gibeon—an inauspicious location for an enemy of David. It was there that Amasa would meet his end. The manner of his death, according to the Bible, was predictable. As in the case of Abner, Joab approached Amasa, ostensibly for private conversation, and stabbed him through the abdomen. The story then tells us that the Judahite army stopped short upon seeing Amasa's corpse in the road, which was quickly moved

into a field and covered. At this point Judah's army, in a declaration of allegiance to David, continued to follow Joab after Sheba.

There is much about this story that doesn't ring true. It seems impossible for David to have mustered Judah's troops, even under Amasa. There would be no need to do so in any case. The three days Amasa is given has a distinctly literary ring to it, as we have seen elsewhere: David hardly needed an excuse to send his private army after Sheba—it would have been the obvious choice from the beginning, with its smaller numbers, greater mobility, and experience. It is equally unlikely that Amasa's troops ever would have caught up to Joab's, since the tribal army would have moved far more slowly than David's militia. The siting of the meeting at Gibeon is so inauspicious as to be suspicious. And the death scene is all too familiar. Finally, the denouement of the episode, Judah's declaration of allegiance to Joab, appears to be a transparent attempt to have the people ratify Amasa's death and David's kingship.

There is no question that Amasa died, but everything else in the story is open to doubt. It is almost certain that David never sent Amasa after Sheba, but rather sent only Joab and Abishai and their men. Whether Joab killed Amasa, wherever and whenever the death took place, is impossible to know. Joab is constantly made out to be the murderous one in the Bible for the sake of preserving David's reputation—as in this case—but it is possible that he really was willing to act as David's personal hit man. However it may have happened, Amasa's death would have been David's decision. No one who had commanded a rebel army against David could be permitted to survive.

Joab and Abishai eventually caught Sheba at the far northern city of Abel in the land of Maacah. To get there, David's men had to pass through the entire northern territory of Israel; that they were able to do so without any difficulty suggests both that Sheba's rebellion had no broader effect and that the north had officially returned to David's side. As for the city of Abel itself, it stood outside Israelite territory, at the source of one of the major tributaries of the Jordan. We have

already noted the kind of treatment that a city housing a rebel would expect to face, and this case was no different, even if the city was in a foreign land. Joab besieged Abel and began battering its wall, intent on killing Sheba even if it meant also destroying the city. But the residents of Abel had nothing at stake in this conflict. They didn't care about Sheba or his revolt. They were, in fact, perfectly happy to hand Sheba over—and they even did the dirty work for Joab, since all they handed over was Sheba's head, unceremoniously tossing it over the wall. With Sheba's death, his revolt ended, for he was its only member.

Once David had returned to power in Jerusalem, he had to deal with only the matter of his concubines, with whom Absalom had slept in the standard pronouncement of a coup. Had Absalom survived, no doubt they would have been sent away with him, just as Ahinoam had been sent away with David. But with Absalom dead, the concubines were of no use to anyone. They were merely a living reminder of Absalom's rebellion. David imprisoned them within the palace for the rest of their lives.

ABSALOM'S REBELLION REVEALED MUCH about David's power in Israel. In victory, David had proved, once again, that he had the military prowess to maintain his authority. Even against the tribal armies of all Israel, David and his personal, professional militia were dominant. The basis for his rule remained the same as it had when he first took power: David still ruled as a conqueror. At the same time, the fact of a popular uprising demonstrated that despite anything he had accomplished during his years on the throne, David remained deeply disliked. Over the generations, Israel would come to venerate David as the ideal king, but in his own time, he was never loved.

David would never again reach the heights of power that he had attained before Absalom's revolt—perhaps because of the strain of trying to maintain power in the face of subjects whom he now knew



despised him; perhaps because of the realization that with Absalom's rebellion and death, his legacy was in question; perhaps simply because of the fatigue of decades of hard fighting to gain and keep the throne in Israel. Perhaps all of these factors contributed to the fact that the rest of David's reign—what little of it remained—witnessed a king in inexorable decline. The man who had once controlled everyone and everything around him would find himself being the one controlled. And, most humiliating for David, who had always used his wives as mere pawns—Ahinoam, Abigail, and Michal—his final fall from power would be at the hands of a woman. Her name was Bathsheba.

## CHAPTER 7

### *David in Decline*

#### WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

THE ROOTS OF DAVID'S FINAL fall from grace can be traced back to much earlier in his reign, to a time when he was at the height of his considerable power and it seemed that nothing could stand in his way. David hardly could have foreseen the long-term consequences of his actions, but the end of his kingship over Israel began when he decided to take Bathsheba as his wife.

David's affair with Bathsheba is one of the most famous parts of the David story. His lust for her, his murder of her husband Uriah, his condemnation by Nathan the prophet, his realization of his guilt—the episode humanizes David in a way seldom seen elsewhere in the biblical narrative of his life. The story is a model of the biblical doctrine that sin must be followed by punishment and repentance. Even the great David made mistakes—and suffered the consequences. Everyone can relate to this, which is why the story has had such an effect on readers over the centuries.<sup>1</sup> But as we saw in the case of the legendary battle against Goliath, sometimes the most famous stories are the most open to doubt.