

David: the judgment of God

Never, never, never, never, never.

King Lear, Act V, Scene III

My son Absalom, Absalom my son, my son.

² Samuel 19:4 [Heb. 19:5]

“Who is David? And who is the son of Jesse?” The answer to Nabal’s question in 1 Samuel 25:10 remains complex and elusive (and that Nabal died for his lack of perception serves as a sobering warning to the adventuresome critic). The story of David, 1 Samuel 16–1 Kings 2, has the makings of tragedy: David’s moment of *hubris* – his compound sin of adultery and murder – and the reversal of his fortunes as a result. But David defies easy categorization as a tragic figure, just as he defies Nabal’s attempt to cast him as an ordinary outlaw. Modern critical assessments stress the multifaceted picture the text gives of David and the difficulty of unraveling his manifold personality.¹ At times he appears pious, trusting, and faithful, as when he faces Goliath armed with only sling and stone and bold words about Yhwh’s protective power. But he may also be calculating and manipulative – in his first recorded speech, he inquires about the reward for slaying Goliath.² He can appear magnanimous, as in his dealings with Jonathan’s son Mephibosheth. But then again, his decision to have Mephibosheth “eat at the king’s table always” (2 Sam. 9:7, 13) could stem from a desire to keep an eye on the hapless Saulide. He inspires loyalty: Ittai, a non-Israelite, who has been in David’s service only a short time, staunchly stands by the king in his darkest moment (2 Sam. 15:19–20). And he can be ruthless, on his deathbed calling down the sword upon Joab and Shimei. He bears much tribulation, yet he seems to lack true tragic greatness, choosing to compromise, to adjust to circumstances, rather than struggle heroically against his lot. Unlike Saul and Jephthah, whose guilt is

uncertain, David’s guilt is clear. His adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband Uriah are not crimes unwittingly committed out of ignorance or due to misjudgment, neither is his failure predestined, as Saul’s seems to have been. Above all, and here the difference from Saul and Jephthah is noteworthy, God does not abandon him.

David’s story makes an especially fitting conclusion to our investigation of the Bible’s tragic dimension precisely because it both admits and resists interpretation along tragic lines. Thus, in what follows, my intention is not to argue that the story must be read as a tragedy, but rather to explore the possibilities and limits of a tragic reading. Specifically, I want to illuminate the tragic vision in 1 Samuel 16–1 Kings 2, and to examine how, in the final analysis, the narrative falls short of realizing its full tragic potential. There is no question the *story* is a tragic story – what happens to David, the “evil” that befalls his house, as the text puts it, is undeniably and profoundly tragic – but the protagonist, for reasons we shall explore below, does not measure up to the role of tragic hero.

In Chapter 3, I argued that the tragic dimension in Jephthah’s story lies not so much in his character as in the events that enmesh him – although, to be sure, the manner of man he is bears directly on what happens to him. David’s case is similar, though David’s character is infinitely more complex, and consequently gives rise to perpetual uncertainty about cause and effect and about how exactly his strengths and weaknesses influence his fortunes. If, like Jephthah, David cannot achieve true heroism in his struggle against fate, he nonetheless undergoes hardships of tragic proportions, and for one anguished moment, when he learns of his son Absalom’s death, he experiences tragic alienation at its extreme. In contrast to the account of Jephthah’s vow and human sacrifice, where God neither condemns nor condones Jephthah’s actions, God responds unambiguously to David’s deeds. God is angry – “the thing David had done was evil in the eyes of Yhwh” (2 Sam. 11:27) – and punishes David by raising up evil against him out of his own house. The burden of divine judgment that David must bear, the working out of nemesis within his house, is what makes David’s story tragic. David cannot prevent the disasters that, one after another, befall his house, and like Saul and Jephthah, he is the cause of them. To what extent he comes to terms with his responsibility is a question we shall consider later. As in Saul’s tragedy, punishment seems out of

will continue to succeed in whatever he does and will eventually reign over Israel, for Yhwh has promised him the kingdom. Eventually even Saul recognizes this: "Now I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hand" (1 Sam. 24:20 [Heb. 24:21]); "Blessed are you, my son David. You will do many things and you will surely succeed" (1 Sam. 26:25).

David's famous double introduction in 1 Samuel 16 and 17 portends great things for him.⁸ When Saul seeks out a musician to ease his tormented spirit, one of his attendants recommends David in terms both glowing and prophetic:

I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, who is skilled in playing music, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and Yhwh is with him. (1 Sam. 16:18)

Whereas we already know Yhwh is with David (16:13), only after he answers Goliath's challenge (1 Samuel 17) shall we encounter him as a man of valor, a man of war, and a man prudent in speech – qualities that will be manifested and tested in a variety of ways.⁹ From the moment he prevails over the mighty Philistine champion, David becomes the people's hero: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands" (1 Sam. 18:7). Straightway all Israel and Judah love him (18:16), including Saul's children Michal and Jonathan, whose loyalty to David in defiance of their father intensifies Saul's desolation. When David flees Saul's court, he has no difficulty amassing a following that grows quickly to 400 men (1 Sam. 22:2) and then to 600 (1 Sam. 23:13).

David receives support from many quarters. Ahimelech the priest, though unaware of David's fugitive status, inquires of God for him, as he has done on other occasions. When Saul later questions him, Ahimelech defends David to the king, "Who is there among all your servants as faithful as David, the king's son-in-law and captain over your bodyguard and honored in your house?" (1 Sam. 22:14).¹⁰ The king of Moab provides a refuge for David's parents (1 Sam. 22:3–4); Gad the prophet warns David (1 Sam. 22:5), Abiathar the priest joins his band (1 Sam. 22:23), and Saul's own son meets with David in the wilderness to encourage him (23:16–18). Even a Philistine raid on Israelite territory benefits David by prompting Saul to abandon the chase just when he has David cornered (23:25–8).

Not only do people he encounters seem well disposed to David and events so often work to his advantage (all contributing to his inevitable success), David's behavior toward those ill disposed to

proportion to guilt, though, as Jan Fokkelman observes, it is qualitatively fitting, if quantitatively excessive.³ As with Saul and Jephthah, we shall discover that in David's story, too, Yhwh assumes an ambivalent role. Like Saul, David sins and confesses sin (2 Sam. 12:13). And though Yhwh never ceases to be involved in David's affairs, he is not with David in the same way as before.

Tragedy, according to Chaucer's monk, tells a story of a fall from prosperity into misery. This simple definition concisely and fairly accurately describes David's story.⁴ David's fortunes, his "rise" and "fall," from his introduction in the narrative in 1 Samuel 16 to his death in 1 Kings 2, follow a tragic course.⁵ The immediate background to David's rise is 1 Samuel 8–15, the inauguration of monarchy in Israel and the first king's failure. As early as 1 Samuel 13, the first account of Saul's rejection, we learn that Yhwh has chosen for himself a man after his own heart to replace Saul as king. In 1 Samuel 16 we discover David is that man. Like Saul, David is secretly anointed by Samuel in the context of a sacrifice. But whereas Saul's anointing took place against the backdrop of Yhwh's negative attitude toward kingship, David's occurs against the backdrop of Yhwh's negative attitude toward Saul. Thus, just as Yhwh was predisposed to reject Saul, he will look favorably on Saul's replacement. No antimonarchic sentiment taints David's election, and Samuel, who as champion of the perils of kingship opposed Saul, plays no real part in David's rise. David faces no opposition except Saul's, whose resistance proves ineffectual. The distinction between the anointed successor and the rejected king could not be greater: the spirit of Yhwh comes upon David (16:13) and departs from Saul (16:14).

To be appreciated in its terrible fullness, David's fall must be viewed against his dramatic rise. We saw in Chapter 2 how Saul serves as a foil to David, and how his dogged efforts to hold on to the kingdom throw into relief the comparative ease with which David acquires the throne from Saul's house.⁶ David's success derives from Yhwh's unqualified support. Early in the narrative we are informed that "David was successful in all his undertakings, for Yhwh was with him" (1 Sam. 18:14), and repeatedly we hear the refrain, "Yhwh was with him,"⁷ as David pursues an unhampered path to the throne. Although he encounters setbacks – for example, when Saul's envy forces him to flee the court, and when he puts his reputation with his people on the line by seeking refuge among the Philistines – everything works out to his advantage. There is no doubt that David

him, especially Saul, but also the churlish Saul-surrogate Nabal, makes him appear worthy of that success and of God's favor. Whereas Saul clearly means to rid himself of his rival, David undertakes no hostile action against Saul. He assumes the role of the wronged party, a faithful subject in spite of Saul's aggression (1 Sam. 20:1; 24:9-15 [Heb. 10-16]; 26:18-20). When Saul pursues David in the wilderness, in hopes of killing him, he ends up in David's power, not once but twice (1 Samuel 24 and 26). Whatever its motivation, David's refusal to kill Yhwh's anointed is one of those grand gestures that can only endear him to the people he will one day rule, even if his followers might prefer more immediate action.¹¹ Between the two accounts of David's sparing Saul's life, the virtuous reputation David has been building for restraint is tested. David comes close to attacking Nabal's household and taking vengeance with his own hands, but Abigail opportunely intercedes to stop him (1 Sam. 25:26, 33-4). Both Abigail and David attribute David's good fortune in avoiding a crime of bloodguilt to Yhwh. Indeed, our hero, as he moves ever closer to the kingship (which Abigail incidentally predicts, 1 Sam. 25:30), seems to lead a charmed life.

A source of David's success and a critical difference between David and Saul is David's ready access to divine counsel. David repeatedly inquires of God and repeatedly receives straightforward answers regarding the course he should take.¹² The fugitive David asks Yhwh about defending Keilah against the Philistines and Yhwh urges him on (1 Sam. 23:2). When his followers express reluctance, David inquires again, and God displays no sign of impatience with David's need for reassurance (23:4). To his further inquiries about the intentions of both Saul and the inhabitants of Keilah, David receives answers that convince him to flee the city. David's inquiries are never rebuked. At other times, Yhwh instructs him about pursuing the Amalekites when Ziklag has been pillaged (1 Sam. 30:7-8), about returning to Judah after Saul's and Israel's defeat at Gilboa (2 Sam. 2:1), and, on two different occasions after his anointing as king over a united Israel and Judah, about fighting the Philistines (2 Sam. 5:19, 22-4). How unfortunate by comparison was Saul, who tried but never quite succeeded in obtaining unambiguous divine guidance.

As we saw in Chapters 2 and 4, Yhwh more than once intervenes overtly on David's behalf: when he sends his spirit upon Saul's messengers and then Saul, rendering them helpless (1 Sam.

19:18-24), and when he causes a deep sleep to fall upon Saul's camp, allowing David and Abishai to enter undetected (1 Samuel 26). In 1 Samuel 26, as in 1 Samuel 24, David and his men acknowledge Yhwh for placing Saul in their power. As Yhwh's chosen, David is Yhwh's protected, and Yhwh delivers David from all harm, be it a man of war, Goliath, or a determined enemy, Saul, or something intangible, like bloodguilt.

It can scarcely be fortuitous that so many events work out in David's favor or that David makes such a favorable impression on everyone, even in potentially compromising situations. David's three-year sojourn among Israel's enemies, the Philistines, might have severely tarnished his reputation. But he avoids becoming a traitor in his people's eyes,¹³ and at the same time he dupes Achish into believing "he has made himself utterly abhorred by his people Israel" (1 Sam. 27:12). Achish even brings David with him to fight against Israel, convinced that David is as innocent as an angel of God. It is essential that the Philistine lords succeed with their objection to David's presence among them, for David can neither oppose Saul, thereby betraying his people, nor cross over to Saul's side, since Israel must lose the battle and Saul must die. Another potentially dangerous situation for David occurs when his band returns from their rendezvous with the Philistines to discover that the Amalekites have pillaged and burned Ziklag in their absence: David's own followers speak of stoning him. The threat is resolved when they pursue the Amalekites, recapture their possessions, and, amazingly, "nothing was missing" (1 Sam. 30:19). There is even a positive benefit arising from the Amalekite raid: David is able to offer a present of Amalekite spoil to his "friends, the elders of Judah," who will soon in their turn offer him kingship over them (30:26-31). Perhaps nowhere is David more publicly appealing than when he laments the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, and, after quickly assuming kingship over Judah, when he protests his innocence of the deaths of Abner and Ishbaal, who blocked his ascent to the throne of Israel. David survives this remarkable series of dubious and compromising adventures without any opprobrium attaching to him, and the united kingdom becomes his without a struggle.

In 2 Samuel 5-8, David reaches the height of his fortunes as king over Israel and Judah. He extends his power, and, in a familiar refrain, the theme of his rise is reiterated: "David became greater and greater, for Yhwh God of hosts was with him" (2 Sam. 5:10). He

126 makes Jerusalem his capital (2 Samuel 5) and the home of Yhwh's ark (2 Samuel 6). To crown his career, David receives from Yhwh the promise of an eternal dynasty (2 Samuel 7) – a dynasty distinguished from Saul's house by virtue of Yhwh's promise not to remove his covenant loyalty from David's house, as he removed it from Saul's. The divinely favored king succeeds both on the battlefield, as a warrior who subdues many nations, and at home, as one who dispenses justice to his people:

Yhwh gave David victory wherever he went. (2 Sam. 8:6 and 14)

David ruled over all Israel, and David administered justice and equity to all his people.¹⁴ (2 Sam. 8:15)

One could hardly imagine a more thoroughgoing success story, and the descent from good fortune into adversity is equally spectacular. Often in tragedy the hero reaches undreamed of heights from which, blinded and spoiled by fortune, he or she displays the *hubris* that results in fortune's turn. David's compound sin of adultery and murder marks such a turning point. It initiates a tragic decline and a descent into suffering which will only occasionally be relieved by events in David's favor. David's wrongdoing involves not just an error of judgment, like Saul's and Jephthah's, but is a sin deliberately pursued. In an unguarded moment of royal indulgence, he has sexual relations with another man's wife, who consequently becomes pregnant. Then, to cover his guilt, David has the husband killed.

Both Saul and Jephthah appeared at a time of leadership crisis in Israel; under David that crisis has been resolved. If a leadership problem exists, it is of a vastly different order, the problem of a king who stays at home while others conduct his battles.¹⁵ Unlike Saul and Jephthah, who make ill-fated choices under urgent circumstances, David sins at leisure: "It happened late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was strolling upon the roof of the king's house that he saw from the roof a woman bathing..." Saul and Jephthah incur guilt on the field of battle, in misguided, but apparently earnest, attempts to ensure victory. In 2 Samuel 11, war is, in fact, being waged, but David's absence is pointedly remarked upon: "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go forth to battle,¹⁶ David sent Joab and his servants with him, and all Israel, and they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah, while David remained in Jerusalem." By not going forth to war, David brings the war home. What began as a war against an outside enemy, Ammon,

will become a war that divides the Davidic house, when David's own son leads a revolt against him. And it will culminate in war involving the whole family of Israel – civil war between the northern and southern tribes.

As we saw with Saul, the privileged position of kings, which enables them to break laws others must respect, disposes them to tragic treatment. David's abuse of royal power sets him on a tragic course.¹⁷ His position allows him both the opportunity and the authority to summon another man's wife to his bed. Against a background of incriminating allusions to the king's idleness (his mid-day nap that stretches until late afternoon, and his evening stroll on the roof) and to his casual voyeurism (he spies a beautiful woman bathing), the deed itself is described briefly:

David sent messengers and took her. She came to him and he lay with her, while she was purifying herself from her uncleanness. Then she returned to her house. (2 Sam. 11:4)

A context of aggression and violence, war with Ammon, surrounds this act of sexual aggression, but the narrator plays down any suggestion of force.¹⁸ The encounter is over as suddenly as it began. That is not, however, the end of the matter. Once the first sin is committed, two things happen – neither of which is a *necessary* consequence – which lead David to commit the second sin. First, though obviously not every act of sexual intercourse issues in pregnancy, as fate would have it, this one does: "The woman conceived and sent and told David, 'I am pregnant'" (v. 5). We know, and David knows, the child is his, for the small but hardly extraneous detail about Bathsheba's ritual purification in v. 4 has ruled out Uriah's possible paternity.¹⁹ In response to the news, David decides to bring Uriah back to Jerusalem on a pretext, send him home where he will have sexual relations with his wife, and let it appear that the child is Uriah's. Clearly the king is not prepared for the second, more disastrous but still unnecessary, consequence: Uriah does not cooperate. The faithful soldier, unlike the king, refuses to enjoy sex with his wife while "the ark and Israel and Judah dwell in booths, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field" (v. 11).²⁰

David is caught up by action he precipitated, now beyond his control. It is a classic tragic situation from which David can find no way out except a way that involves him more deeply in sin. David

does not have Uriah killed out of desire to have Bathsheba for himself – for letting Uriah think the child his own would solve his problem – but because he has no other way to conceal his adultery with Bathsheba, since Uriah refuses to “go down to his house.” The king writes to Joab, telling him to arrange for Uriah to be killed in battle, and even has the gall to send the letter by Uriah’s hand. Surely this is *hubris* almost unchecked, as well as a calculated act of desperation. The murder requires yet another perpetrator and claims other victims. Joab must arrange Uriah’s death to look like a casualty of war, and to do so he is forced to use bad military strategy. In addition to Uriah, other faithful soldiers die as part of the cover-up.

Upon receiving the news of the deaths of some of his soldiers, including Uriah, David sends a message back to Joab: “Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes, for the sword devours now one and now another...” (11:25). What is “this thing” – the military defeat? the conspiracy to murder Uriah? the deaths of other valiant soldiers? what the command to have Uriah killed says about David’s character? The whole business were better forgotten, suggests David, but he cannot so easily escape the repercussions of his deed (not “this thing” [*haddabar hazzeh*] but “the thing David had done” [*haddabar asah david*]): “The thing David had done was evil in the eyes of Yhwh” (v. 27). David’s *hubris* in violating the limits of kingship, his failure to obey God’s laws and to deal justly with his subjects, cannot go unpunished.²¹ Yhwh sends Nathan to chastise David, with the accusation, “Why have you despised the word of Yhwh, to do what is evil in his eyes?” (12:9). These key words of David’s speech to Joab, “evil” and “the sword,” come back now to haunt him, for Nathan promises that evil and the sword will be his nemesis. Nathan, who speaks for nemesis, picks up the words:

“Uriah the Hittite you have slain with the sword, and his wife you have taken to be your wife, and him you have killed with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house.”

(2 Sam. 12:9b–10a)

“Because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife” – thus says Yhwh – “I am raising up evil against you out of your own house, and I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the eyes of this sun. For you did it in secret, but I shall do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.”²² (2 Sam. 12:10b–12)

David’s “this thing,” which Joab was to dismiss from his mind

(11:25), becomes Yhwh’s “this thing” (*haddabar hazzeh*), which will be done openly.

It is no accident that punishment falls upon the house. Yhwh promised to build David a secure house (2 Samuel 7), now he says the sword will never depart from that house.²³ We saw in the tragedies of Saul and Jephthah that the sins of the fathers were visited upon the children, bringing down their houses in a tragic denouement. Jephthah’s daughter had to die that his vow might be fulfilled. Saul’s family all suffer as members of a fated house. In David’s case there is an added twist, a tragic complication. Yhwh uses David’s children as the *instruments* of their father’s punishment. David’s sins are not only visited upon his children but reenacted by them. Tamar’s rape by Amnon and Amnon’s murder by Absalom reflect David’s sin with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah. In the reprise, the sexual crime is by contrast explicitly brutal,²⁴ while the murder might be considered more justified, since Absalom acts to avenge his sister. Absalom has his servants murder Amnon just as David had Joab murder Uriah, with the difference that this second murder is carried out openly (just as later Absalom will openly rape David’s wives in the sight of all Israel, thereby fulfilling Nathan’s prophecy).

Upon hearing Nathan’s story about the rich man’s crime against the poor man and his ewe lamb, David exclaims that the man should pay fourfold “because he did this thing.”²⁵ David himself will pay four times over. Four of his sons die, the first three while he lives to see it: the unnamed first-born child of David and Bathsheba; Amnon, David’s first-born son and heir; Absalom, for whom David would have given his own life; and Adonijah, the son next in line for the kingship before Solomon. As for the sword never departing from David’s house, three sons (Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah) meet violent deaths, not by the swords of outsiders, but at the hands of other members of David’s house. Amnon is slain on his brother Absalom’s orders; Adonijah, on those of his brother Solomon. Joab is responsible for Absalom’s death, as well as Amasa’s – sons, brothers, nephews, cousins, all being caught up in the cycle of violence. In accord with David’s deathbed orders, Solomon has Joab struck down. The threat of the sword extends to the house of Israel, which ought to be under David’s care (“I gave you the house of Israel and Judah,” 2 Sam. 12:8). Rebellion almost tears the kingdom apart: first from within the Davidic house, when Absalom leads a revolt against his father; then from without, from Saul’s tribe of Benjamin,

when Sheba incites the northern tribes against the Davidic house (a reminder that David is not finished with the rival house of Saul).

The bitterness of David's tragedy is that he not only cannot spare his children misery, but he even plays an unwitting role in the tragic fates they suffer. The first son Bathsheba bears to David dies in David's place, as it were ("you shall not die; nevertheless... the child that is born to you shall die"). Neither David's penitence nor his prayers can reverse Yhwh's decision (2 Sam. 12:15b-23). David figures prominently in Jonadab's scheme to help Amnon seduce his sister Tamar: Jonadab calculates that if Amnon feigns illness, the king will visit him and grant his request that Tamar be sent to prepare food for him. Indeed, David sends his obedient daughter off to Amnon's house, where she will be raped and then discarded (2 Sam. 13:7). David also sends Amnon with Absalom for the sheep-shearing where Absalom has him killed, although this time the king appears reluctant: "Why should he go with you?" But he sends him anyway after Absalom repeatedly presses him (2 Sam. 13:24-7). When Absalom returns to Jerusalem after a three-year exile, David's refusal to see his son (14:24, 28) and their eventual strained reconciliation symbolized by a ceremonial kiss²⁶ may well have intensified Absalom's hostility and contributed to his eventual rebellion. It is David who grants Absalom leave to go to Hebron, where he sets his insurrection in motion (15:7-12).²⁷ Finally, David's appointment of Solomon to succeed him spells death for Adonijah, who was next in line for the throne (1 Kings 2:15).

With Absalom's revolt and death, David's fortunes reach their lowest point. The evil Yhwh promised to raise up against David out of his own house is fully unleashed, and the divine judgment to give David's wives to another to lie with "before all Israel and before the sun" comes to pass in a tent pitched for Absalom on the roof. Now the tragic receives its fullest expression in a rare, intimate view of David. In his vulnerability the king becomes most sympathetic.²⁸ His conduct indicates a genuine inner conflict. This is not the first time he has shown ambivalence toward Absalom; he longed for Absalom after Absalom fled Jerusalem but refused to see him after his return. Now, however, his mood is more intense, as he wavers between desire to hold on to his kingdom and protectiveness toward his son who would take it from him forcibly. David's erratic behavior suggests confusing, conflicting emotions. He abandons Jerusalem without a struggle, but thereafter puts up a determined fight for his throne,

and, when the crisis has been resolved, cares less about the battle's outcome than about his son's well-being.

In his flight from Absalom, David reaches true tragic status. This is made possible because we see him for the first time, like Lear cast out by his offspring, as unaccommodated man. Once loved by all the people (1 Sam. 18:16; 2 Sam. 3:36), David is forced to flee for his life by his son, who has found considerable support among David's subjects (2 Sam. 15:12). Not that David lacks a following: he withdraws from Jerusalem with his attendants, "all his household" (except the ten wives left to keep the house), "all the people," Joab (though we do not hear of him at this point), "all his servants," "all the Cherethites, and all the Pelethites, and all the six hundred Gittites," including the faithful Ittai.²⁹ As they cross the Kidron toward the wilderness, "all the country wept aloud as all the people passed by" (15:23). Others who would join the king are sent back: Abiathar and Zadok "with all the Levites," Ahimaaz and Jonathan, and Hushai. Yet despite the many people he can rely on, David's suffering has the effect of isolating him from them, for though they remain loyal to him politically, they cannot share his personal pain at his son's betrayal.³⁰ David's sense of isolation is revealed when he refers to Absalom as "the king," while the narrator and David's followers use that title for David (2 Sam. 15:19). Psychologically has he already abdicated? In a moving scene on the Mount of Olives, David stands out as a symbol of desolation among the people, who seem almost incidental:

David went up the slope of the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went, with his head covered, going barefoot. All the people who were with him covered their heads and they went up, weeping as they went. (2 Sam. 15:30)

That the people are no real source of comfort for the king will soon enough become apparent, when David's grief over Absalom's death will reveal that they mean less to him than his rebel son (2 Sam. 19:6 [Heb. 19:7]).

A further blow to David's already shattered spirit is the humiliation he suffers from Shimei's curses and stone-throwing, as his retreat continues. Abishai is eager to right the public disgrace to the king and his entourage by cutting off Shimei's head, but David sees the insult as a personal matter, one he accepts as related to Absalom's treason: "My own son seeks my life; how much more so may this Benjaminite!" (2 Sam. 16:11). Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem,

David seems so to have lost control of his future that it is Hushai who must counsel him to cross the Jordan during the night in order to escape Absalom's forces (2 Sam. 17:15-22).

Although David wages no heroic struggle against his fate, he does not yield completely. He appeals to Yhwh, but he also relies on his own cunning, suggesting ways Abiathar, Zadok, and Hushai can be of use to him (2 Sam. 15:27-36). But in spite of displaying some characteristics of the old David, he is no longer the mighty warrior of earlier fame. Tragic events have taken their toll. His soldiers advise him not to go out to battle, lest he be killed, and he meekly accepts "whatever is good in [their] eyes" (18:4; a contrast to the Ammonite war, during which David remained at home to do "evil in the eyes of Yhwh" when he should have gone to fight). The only command he gives to his troops as they go into battle is to "deal gently with the youth Absalom," a command heard by all the people (18:5, 12). Repeatedly he refers to his son as a "youth" (*na'ar*), as though he were only a child, and not a threat to his kingdom and his life (David, for example, was only a youth when he slew Goliath).

Joab and his armor-bearers kill Absalom (2 Sam. 18:15). Another seventeen verses pass before David learns that Absalom is dead. Our knowledge of Absalom's death long before David hears of it does not diminish suspense but actually heightens it, since it delays the moment of tragic recognition.³⁴ We know, but David does not know, and thus we watch him endure the agony of waiting. We are forced to wait while information about Absalom's pillar is given. A series of vivid scenes follows: two runners are dispatched to bring David news of the battle; the runners are observed by a watchman who tells the king what he sees; finally, each of the runners gives his battle report, with only the second willing to answer David's question about Absalom. The scene between Ahimaaz and Joab (2 Sam. 18:19-23), where Ahimaaz finally convinces Joab to let him run after the Cushite, is necessary to set the stage for the arrival of two messengers in vv. 28-32, and it introduces the concern with "bearing tidings" (*bsr*), a term repeated nine times in vv. 19-32. But what purpose does the exchange between David and the watchman serve (vv. 24-7) if not purely to retard the action and prolong the king's uncertainty?

David was sitting between the two gates and the watchman went up to the roof of the gate by the wall. When he lifted up his eyes and looked, he saw a man running alone. The watchman called out and told the king, and the king said, "If he is alone, there are tidings in his mouth." And he drew

Ahiathophel in his wisdom senses David's isolation and his tenuous bond with the people when he counsels Absalom:

I will come upon him while he is weary and disheartened, and throw him into a panic, and all the people who are with him will flee. I will kill the king alone, and I will bring back all the people to you. When all return [except] the man you seek,³¹ all the people will be at peace. (2 Sam. 17:2-3)

Hushai is wrong when he counters Ahiathophel's advice, but he too, interestingly, separates David from the people:

You know that your father and his men are mighty men, and that they are enraged, like a bear robbed of her cubs in the field. Your father is expert in war; he will not spend the night with the people. (2 Sam. 17:8)

The confused and hopeless state David has reached manifests itself in the exhaustion he and his followers have experienced by the time they reach the Jordan (16:14). On the other side of the Jordan, at Mahanaim, Shobi, Machir, and Barzillai meet the weary entourage with provisions (17:29). On both sides of the Jordan, David receives physical sustenance (Ziba had earlier brought supplies, 16:1-2), but what of emotional sustenance? Although he calls on Yhwh for help (2 Sam. 15:31), David cannot "strengthen himself in God," as he had in an earlier crisis, when at Ziklag his men had spoken of stoning him (1 Sam. 30:6). Perhaps he can no longer confidently rely on Yhwh's support. From David's perspective, it is tempting to believe that Shimei is now right when he says, "Yhwh has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom" (16:8).

On his way to the kingship, when he fled before Saul, who actually was king, David was able both to act resourcefully and to turn to Yhwh for guidance. Now in his flight from Absalom, whom he dispiritedly calls "the king," he seems confused and irresolute.³² When he hears of the rebellion, he instructs his followers, "Let us flee at once, or else there will be no escape for us from Absalom. Go in haste, lest he overtake us quickly, and bring down evil upon us, and smite the city with the edge of the sword" (2 Sam. 15:14). David's reference to "evil" and the "sword" echoes Yhwh's judgment against his house. Is he acquiescing in his fate or seeking to flee from it? Why does the king, a seasoned warrior, simply abandon Jerusalem to Absalom? Perhaps to spare the city.³³ But it appears he has no plan: to Ittai he protests, "Shall I today make you wander about with us, when I am going wherever I can go?" (2 Sam. 15:20). And

nearer and nearer. The watchman saw another man running, and the watchman called to the gate and said, "Look, another man running alone!" The king said, "He also brings tidings." The watchman said, "I see that the running of the foremost is like the running of Ahimaaz the son of Zadok." The king said, "He is a good man and comes with good tidings."

The very unnecessary of this scene, the way time drags, lends pathos to David's situation. The king hangs on to hope, looking for signs that things will work out. Perhaps he recalls an earlier occasion, when the report that all the king's sons were dead turned out to be false, since soon thereafter it became apparent only Amnon was dead (2 Sam. 13:30-6). Clearly the king is anxious to learn what has happened, but his anticipation that Ahimaaz "is a good man and comes with good tidings" (*besorah tobah*, v. 27) raises the question: what tidings will the king consider good? Not, it turns out, the news that his forces have won the day.

In addition to delaying David's discovery of his son's fate, the narrative use of two messengers and two messages discloses most vividly what occupies David's mind. When Ahimaaz arrives with a cry of *shalom* and news of victory, David shows no interest in details of the battle or casualties among his troops, but only in the welfare of the rebel leader: "Is it well with the youth Absalom?" Ahimaaz' lie that he does not know further prolongs David's uncertainty. The Cushite arrives next with tidings of victory (*yitbasser*), and David asks him the same question, "Is it well with the youth Absalom?" Upon hearing the answer at last, David breaks down. The news transforms his anxiety into pain. Just as in Saul's tragedy, where the hero's fearful state was vividly depicted at the low point in his fortunes, his visit to the medium at En-dor, similarly here, at David's personal nadir, his grief is repeatedly exposed: "the king was deeply shaken"; "he wept" (18:33 [Heb. 19:1]). Joab is told "the king is weeping and mourning for Absalom" (19:1 [19:2]). The people hear, "the king is grieving for his son" (19:2 [19:3]). And again, "the king covered his face"; "the king cried with a loud voice" (19:4 [19:5]).

The shock reduces David to anguished repetition:

My son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you! Absalom, my son, my son! (2 Sam. 18:33 [Heb. 19:1])

So intense is the pain that he can do no more than repeat essentially the same outpouring of grief a few verses later:

My son Absalom, Absalom, my son, my son! (2 Sam. 19:4 [Heb. 19:5])

As an expression of utter loss, David's lament over Absalom, like Lear's fivefold "never" and Job's "cursed be the day I was born," touches the core of tragic despair. It threatens to render meaningless everything Yhwh has done for him. Yhwh gave David the kingdom as he had given it to Saul earlier, but unlike Saul, David never showed any sign of not wanting to be king. Although he does not want Absalom to be successful in his bid for the throne, he also does not want Absalom to be hurt. And he cannot have it both ways. This is the focus of David's tragic conflict. Political victory is a personal defeat. He wins the battle but loses his son and wishes he could give his life instead. Part of him seems to have died with Absalom. The part that survives will again be king – but a diminished king.

Lear dies of a broken heart. David endures, broken in spirit. His grief, so tragically excessive, demoralizes the people:

The victory that day was turned into mourning for all the people; for the people heard that day, "The king is grieving for his son." So the people stole into the city that day as people steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle. (2 Sam. 19:2-3 [Heb. 19:3-4])

Circumstances could hardly be more inverted or catastrophic: a king so thoroughly absorbed in his personal tragedy that he gives no thought to the soldiers who have risked their lives for him.³⁵ Such irrational behavior provokes Joab to recall the king to his responsibility. Joab's accusation, "... you have made it clear today that commanders and servants are nothing to you ... if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased" (19:6 [Heb. 19:7]), may overstate the case, but it testifies to David's extremity. Joab warns David that the entire army could desert him by daybreak. And such an outcome, he avers, would be an even greater tragedy, "worse for you than all the evil that has come upon you from your youth until now" (2 Sam. 19:7 [Heb. 19:8]). Never before has David taken rebuke of this kind from a subordinate; perhaps he accepts it because he has already expended all emotion.³⁶ Without a word, he takes his place at the gate.

Unlike Saul, who is crushed by fate, David bears tribulation from this point forward with a certain acceptance. That, after Absalom's death, David's fortunes take an uncertain course becomes apparent in his journey back to Jerusalem, when he meets various people he had encountered during his flight. These encounters seem uneventful enough; they are not cases where one would expect problems to

develop. But on closer examination they reveal a way things have of going awry – not necessarily *wrong*, but somehow out of kilter – for David as he regains his throne.³⁷ He pardons Shimei for cursing him and promises “you shall not die.” One might expect Shimei to drop out of the picture, like so many minor characters, or at least no longer to be an irritation to David; but something sinister and unresolved lingers, for on his deathbed David arranges Shimei’s death.³⁸ Once flattered as having wisdom “like the angel of God to discern good and evil” (2 Sam. 14:17), David proves incapable of deciding the issue of loyalty between Ziba and Mephibosheth, where one might expect some resolution.³⁹ He offers the good life in Jerusalem to Barzillai, but his offer is rejected, albeit graciously, and David must settle for Chimham. More important actions on David’s part turn out to have distinctly negative consequences. Of long-lasting significance is his encouragement of competition between the northern and southern tribes, regarding who should be first to restore the king to the throne. In the wake of the resulting tribal animosity, Sheba calls the northern tribes to revolt (2 Sam. 19:11–12, 41–3 [Heb. 19:12–13, 42–4]; 20:1–2). To make matters worse, David’s appointment of Amasa to replace Joab as commander of the army turns out to be a serious mistake when Amasa fails to rally Judah promptly against Sheba (2 Sam. 19:13 [Heb. 19:14]; 20:4–6).

If David was on the sidelines during the battle with Absalom’s followers, he is even more removed from the events of Sheba’s rebellion, where Joab and the wise woman of Abel resolve the crisis. Oddly, David’s restoration to the throne of a united Israel and Judah and the actual reconciliation between the northern and southern tribes are not recounted, and therefore we can only wonder with what exuberance or perhaps resignation these events were greeted.

The account of David’s final days brings an uneasy measure of resolution and reprieve. The chronological problem of 2 Samuel 21–4 has been much debated. There are indeed flashbacks here, and summaries of earlier periods of David’s life – but since the events described in these chapters are narrated at this point in the story, we may view them both as a commentary on the preceding chapters and as a further stage in David’s career.⁴⁰ Israel suffers. Significantly, we hear the accounts of a famine (2 Samuel 21), alleviated after David sends seven of Saul’s “sons” to their deaths, and of pestilence (2 Samuel 24), for which David offers his house in expiation, only after we have witnessed David losing sons to violence and after his house has been nearly decimated. Also in 2 Samuel 21 we encounter a

wearied David (21:15), whom someone else must save from a Philistine giant (vv. 16–17). David has become a liability to his followers; they demand that he no more go out to battle with them (2 Sam. 21:17). And giant-slaying, for which David was once famous, is left to others. As if he sensed that David is now well on the way to becoming a non-person, the narrator begins to rewrite his story, ascribing David’s famous victory against Goliath to one Elhanan (2 Sam. 21:19). If David is able to recite psalms of praise (2 Samuel 22 and 23), we cannot hear them without overtones of irony in view of the actual course of his fortunes: “Yhwh has recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to my purity in his eyes.”

David lives to appoint his successor, though it is hard to resist the impression that David in 1 Kings 1–2 lacks any real power of decision. He is the object of manipulation, and as such, more pathetic than tragic. An unflattering picture of David emerges in these final chapters: he appears senile and impotent, easily duped but vindictive to the end. David dies and is buried in the city of David, but we hear nothing of public or private mourning at his death, such as one would expect for a great and beloved king. David himself had openly lamented the deaths of Saul, Jonathan, Abner, and Absalom,⁴¹ but how deeply does anyone – even Bathsheba who earlier lamented Uriah’s death – mourn the king’s death? In contrast to Saul, Jonathan, Abner, and Absalom, who died by the sword, David dies quietly, but not without bequeathing violence to his son Solomon. Solomon’s succession to the throne is marked by deceit, intrigue, and murder, as he moves determinedly to protect his interests just as his father had done in the Bathsheba affair.⁴² Thus we find Solomon, in a kind of poetically just closure, “reliving the circumstances of his own birth,” as David Gunn puts it⁴³ – a sign that tragedy within the Davidic house is far from over.

Central to David’s tragedy has been his encounter with a God whose relentless judgment he cannot escape. It is not simply a question of morality, of sin and punishment, for tragedy is more than this. Tragic guilt involves both the transgression of a prohibition and the guiltiness of being that calls down upon itself excessive consequences.⁴⁴ The divine metamorphosis from David’s protector to his prosecutor does not suddenly result from David’s sins of adultery and murder. Already before David commits these wrongful deeds, there are signs

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that Yhwh no longer unqualifiedly champions David's cause. An early note of dissonance is sounded in 2 Samuel 6, as David reaches the height of his fortune. David's first attempt to bring the ark of Yhwh to Jerusalem miscarries when Yhwh kills Uzzah for touching the ark. Perhaps this failure is meant to warn David that he does not control Yhwh.⁴⁵ David's response is anger (v. 8), fear (v. 9), and unwillingness to take the ark into the city (v. 10). He tries again, after being reassured that the ark brings blessing, and though this time he succeeds in establishing the ark in Jerusalem, the ensuing domestic dispute with Michal foreshadows the discord that will later plague the royal house.

Throughout the account of David's sin (2 Samuel 11), Yhwh is conspicuously absent, just as Yhwh is absent at the moment of sin in the garden of Eden. In view of Yhwh's active participation in David's affairs during his rise to the throne, it is striking that Yhwh does not intervene, even if indirectly, to prevent David from sinning. In 1 Samuel 25, for example, when David is prepared to kill Nabal and his entire male household, Yhwh seems to have used Abigail to prevent David from shedding innocent blood. On this earlier occasion, it is Yhwh who kills the husband, and David gets the wife without incurring guilt.⁴⁶ But the situation is different in 2 Samuel 11, and David (necessarily?) yields to temptation. Is it coincidence that Bathsheba is bathing – on the roof – when David takes his afternoon stroll, or is David, like the first couple, being tested? Even in the matter of Bathsheba's pregnancy, like Michal's childlessness, divine involvement cannot be ruled out.

In 2 Samuel 11–12, as was also the case in the garden of Eden, Yhwh appears only after the sin, to mete out punishment. And, again, as in the garden story, the guilty do not die – though Yhwh threatened the first couple with death in the day they ate the forbidden fruit, and David has pronounced a sentence of death upon himself. In both cases, however, wrongdoing is severely punished. Yhwh sends a prophet to condemn David. We have only to recall that Yhwh always spoke to Saul indirectly, through the prophet Samuel, to see in Nathan's appearance before David a subtle suggestion that David will no longer enjoy easy access to Yhwh. In Yhwh's name, Nathan recites what Yhwh has done for David – and how much more he would still do.⁴⁷ But now David will experience Yhwh's other side.

The certainty of God David knew during his rise to the throne

becomes, after his sin, only a possibility that does not determine the action. "Who knows whether Yhwh will be gracious to me that the child may live?" (2 Samuel 12:22), asks David, hoping to persuade Yhwh to spare the child condemned to death for his sin. But Yhwh is not gracious.⁴⁸ Again, "If I find favor in Yhwh's eyes, he will bring me back," David says when he flees Jerusalem before Absalom (15:25), and "perhaps Yhwh will look upon my affliction and Yhwh will repay me with good for this cursing of me today" (16:12). Indeed, David does return to Jerusalem and he is restored to the throne; but is it a "repaying with good" if the price of David's return is his son's death and the near split of the kingdom?

In 2 Samuel 15:31, upon learning that his counselor has joined Absalom's conspiracy, David prays, "O Yhwh, please, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness." Immediately thereafter he meets Hushai, whom he sends back to persuade Absalom to reject Ahithophel's advice. Hushai succeeds because "Yhwh had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel" (2 Samuel 17:14). Has Yhwh answered David's prayer, as some interpreters claim,⁴⁹ or is the defeat of Ahithophel's counsel rather the working out of nemesis within the Davidic house – a nemesis that calls for another royal son to die by the sword? The reason given for Yhwh's intervention is to "bring evil upon Absalom" (17:14), not to help David or to bring about David's restoration to the throne. Absalom has sought to usurp. Whatever the connection between David's prayer, the defeat of Ahithophel's counsel, and Absalom's death, it is not a simple one. David could not induce Yhwh to spare his first son with Bathsheba; it would be tragically ironic indeed if he now could influence Yhwh to defeat his son Absalom. Although David is implicated in Absalom's death (and in Tamar's rape, Amnon's murder, and Absalom's rebellion), he is not responsible for these disasters. He is, however, accountable for them; his children's ruin is his punishment. But, we may ask, is it not a savage God who has chosen *this particular way* to punish him? Like Jephthah, when he vowed to sacrifice the one who met him upon his victorious return from battle, David, in praying that Yhwh confound Ahithophel's counsel, may not have intended the death of his child, but that is, tragically, what happens.

Only once more in the narrative, after his kingship is reestablished following both Absalom's revolt and Sheba's, do we again find David consulting Yhwh (2 Samuel 21). Famine has ravaged the land for three years before David seeks divine guidance, a clear sign that

David's former intimacy with Yhwh has been fractured. Yhwh responds to David's inquiry, but not as in earlier days, when he so often told David what to do. Now the Gibeonites tell him what he must do, and, as we saw in Chapter 4, a combination of events that eludes rational explanation leads God to heed supplications for the land. Elements of this account are echoed in 2 Samuel 24, where it is David's sin, not Saul's, that brings affliction upon the kingdom. Here, as in 2 Samuel 12, David confesses to sin – not once, but twice ("I have sinned," vv. 10, 17); and as in 2 Samuel 12, Yhwh instructs David through a prophet. Significantly, however, David's sin is attributed directly to Yhwh: "Again the anger of Yhwh was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, 'Go, number Israel and Judah'" (v. 1).

Why Yhwh is angry we are not told. Reviewing sequentially the narrative of David's career, we can observe a shift in God's dealings with him, from practically unqualified support during David's rise, to absence at the moment of sin, to this final act of causing David to sin. David is allowed to select his punishment, and he asks to fall into Yhwh's, rather than human, hands because Yhwh is merciful (24:14). Yhwh then sends a plague which destroys thousands. Finally Yhwh repents of the evil; David confesses sin a second time, and asks that the punishment fall upon his house rather than his people, and erects an altar as Yhwh commands. As in 2 Samuel 21, cause and effect are difficult to untangle as events come to a resolution: "Yhwh heeded supplications for the land and the plague was averted from Israel" (2 Sam. 24:25). This comment at the end of 2 Samuel followed in 1 Kings 1–2 by the account of David's final days, where Yhwh is spoken of, and Yhwh's blessing is invoked, but Yhwh does nothing to make Solomon king. Yhwh's virtual absence here contrasts markedly with his direct involvement in clearing the way for David's kingship.⁵⁰

Whether or not David is duped into proclaiming Solomon king is not entirely clear.⁵¹ Although Bathsheba and Nathan claim David had promised the throne to Solomon, we have only their word for it; the text does not record such an important act on David's part. Solomon is crowned while the king still lives. Besides the suggestion that David is sexually impotent with the young and beautiful Abishag, and oblivious to the political intrigue already set in motion by rival factions within his family, the picture of David as a king who is no longer king offers further testimony to his incapacity and

decreasing significance. In essence, nothing is left for him to do but curse his enemies and die. Perhaps for this reason his death receives little attention; he has already yielded his place in the narrative to "King Solomon" (1 Kings 1:34, 39, 43, 51, 53). First, however, while David is still king – in fact, the last time the narrative refers to him as "king" – he praises Yhwh for letting him see his heir on the throne (1 Kings 1:48). Whether we view him in his final days as tragically pathetic or pathetically tragic, his appointment of Solomon has a tragic consequence for yet another son, a consequence David does not seem to consider: Adonijah will have to die before Solomon can be sure of his position.

On his deathbed, David charges Solomon to keep Yhwh's commandments:

that Yhwh may establish his word which he spoke concerning me, "If your sons take heed to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their being, there shall not fail you a man on the throne of Israel." (1 Kings 2:4)

In words placed in David's mouth, Yhwh takes back the unconditional, eternal covenant promised in 2 Samuel 7. For the Davidic house, there are no more certainties.⁵²

In a psalm attributed to David "on the day Yhwh delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul," David says of Yhwh:

With the loyal you show yourself loyal,
with the blameless hero, you show yourself blameless,
with the pure you act in purity,
with the crooked you show yourself perverse.
You deliver a humble people,
but your eyes are upon the haughty to bring them low.⁵³

(2 Sam. 22:26–8)

The words both fit and do not fit what we know about David's experience of Yhwh, and therefore are an appropriate commentary on a story not unacquainted with tragic ambiguity. Yhwh is remarkably loyal to David during his rise to the throne, even though at times David could be considered a scoundrel. In meting out punishment for the Bathsheba/Uriah affair, when David was indeed crooked, Yhwh was savage, and perhaps "perverse" is not off the mark. Above all, the recognition that "your eyes are upon the

haughty to bring them low" expresses the tragic theme of *hubris* that attracts nemesis, a theme so pervasive in the whole David story.

* * *

We have seen ample reason to speak of a tragic dimension in the story of David. We find it in the reversal of the hero's fortunes that takes place as a result of his sins, in the suggestions of hostile transcendence that accompany David's guilt, and in the series of unmitigated disasters that beset the Davidic house. Yet the tragic vision present in the story is not fully realized. What prevents David from attaining truly tragic proportions, something like the tragic grandeur of his predecessor Saul? There is no simple answer to this question, which brings us ever back to our initial question: who is David, and who is the son of Jesse? It is not just that David's personality is complex, elusive, and impenetrable – though this is one reason David comes through as less than tragic. David often surprises us with his unexpected responses, whose real motivation can never quite be determined, as, for example, with Saul in the cave or with his infant son. Another reason, the root of the matter, is found in the king himself, who simply does not assume the role of tragic hero. Though he suffers, he is not dignified by suffering, as is Saul. Saul we found to be an extremely complex and volatile personality, a man whose passions and powerful, conflicting emotions hurt both himself and those around him. At key points in the narrative, we are allowed intimate access to his violent nature, his pathetic, paranoid vulnerability, and more – we are privy to the inner struggle of his tormented spirit. What we see is not all bad or blameworthy. Saul is a towering figure, not just head and shoulders above the people in stature but also in his intensity, and, especially, by virtue of his resistance – his refusal to bow to fate – though fate, in the end, crushes him.

David, by contrast, seems small. He displays none of Saul's heroic defiance, and little, if any, of his inner struggle. Although the story grants David little privacy – indeed, it reveals more intimate details of his personal life than we heard of Saul – David remains inaccessible, his motives and feelings all too often unknown. What, for example, prompts David to commit the sins of adultery and murder in the first place? boredom? a sense of limitless power? disregard for his subjects' rights? lust and then fear of discovery? Whatever it is

that motivates David, it is no noble flaw. He does not, like Saul and Jephthah, do the wrong thing while trying to do the right thing. Saul, we recall, sins by imploring divine favor before battle, even though it means offering the sacrifice without waiting for Samuel; he errs again, when he spares the best of Amalekite spoil, avowedly to sacrifice to Yhwh at Gilgal. Similarly, Jephthah promises a sacrifice to Yhwh if Israel attains victory over Ammon, not anticipating that he will find himself in the position of having to sacrifice his daughter. Whatever we think of Saul's and Jephthah's "flaws," they face head-on the consequences of their actions with a heroic determination that gives them a certain grandeur. Their refusal to compromise (as Saul might have, for example, by abdicating, or Jephthah, by not sacrificing his daughter) is a quality tragic heroes tend to have in common. David, as we have seen, does wrong willfully, almost as a matter of course, seemingly impervious to God's laws and kingship's requirements. And David is a consummate compromiser; he adapts to circumstances. David is too much the pragmatist to be broken by fate when he can bend. This is why he ultimately falls short of becoming a genuine tragic hero.

If his flaw is not noble, neither does David deal nobly with its consequences. When disaster strikes one child after another in quick succession, David mourns, weeps, and goes through the motions of grief, but only with Absalom does he display such anguish as is born of tragic guilt. We must ask, therefore, what happens to David as the meaning of punishment by evil and the sword gradually becomes known to him in its fullness? David's failure to take any outwardly appreciable measures to avoid his fate suggests the absence of genuine inner struggle. At the same time, the virtual textual silence regarding any inner struggle gives the impression that he displays little outward resistance.

In the first place, the fact of punishment seems to take him by surprise (2 Samuel 12); at the least, he responds strangely. Like Oedipus with Teiresias, David at first is blind to his guilt and cannot recognize himself in the prophet's words that identify him as a murderer. Does he react so strongly to the rich man's crime because of his own guilty conscience, as Fokkelman suggests,⁵⁴ or can it be that he has no sense of guilt, that he has followed his own advice to Joab ("Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes," 2 Sam. 11:25) and simply put the matter of Bathsheba and Uriah out of mind? Nathan must point out the king's error: "You are the man" (2 Sam. 12:7).

Upon learning what his transgression will mean for his house, David confesses, "I have sinned against Yhwh" (v. 13), and has nothing more to say. There is, as yet, no tragic recognition, no protest against the enormity of this punishment, no cry that it is more than he can bear. David is no Oedipus, lamenting in his extremity, "If there is any ill worse than ill, that is the lot of Oedipus." And when Nathan adds that Yhwh will spare his life and take the life of his child instead, David cannot even rise to the grand tragic occasion, but makes no reply. Only later will he wish he could have died in another son's place.

David's minimal response to Nathan might be interpreted to mean that the shock has reduced him to speechlessness, but it recalls his reaction on an earlier occasion when David had occasioned tragedy, the massacre of the priests of Nob (1 Samuel 22). When Saul had the priests of Nob killed and the city razed, one man, Abiathar, escaped to tell David. David admits, "I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul. I am to blame for all the deaths in your father's house" (1 Sam. 22:22). Faced with such an atrocity, however, he displays no outward signs of remorse or outrage. He offers Abiathar sanctuary since "he that seeks my life seeks your life" (1 Sam. 22:23) – a gesture that requires no sacrifice on David's part. David destroys houses – Ahimelech's, Saul's, his own – but how deeply does David feel a sense of tragic responsibility?

David's responses to the misfortunes that befall his children, one by one, offer a key to understanding the kind of tragic hero David is. When Yhwh strikes David's unnamed son so that he becomes ill, David fasts and weeps. But when the child dies, David gets up, washes and anoints himself, changes his clothes, goes off to worship Yhwh, and then returns to his house to eat. What kind of grief is this? David's servants, not unreasonably, had expected him to show more distress over the child's death than over his illness, even to the extent of doing himself harm (12:18). When they remark upon this unusual behavior, David explains, "Now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me" (2 Sam. 12:23).⁵⁵ The matter is closed; life goes on, David comforts Bathsheba and soon gets another son. Thus, as punishment begins, there is compensation, with the second son, Solomon, given a distinct advantage: "Yhwh loved him" (12:24). Circumstances encourage David in adapting to his fate and perhaps in finding it endurable. If there had been no second child, he would have had to

live with the death of the first and might even have come to appreciate its tragic dimension. Since there is a second son, David can compromise his potential as tragic hero.

David is to be painfully humiliated where it hurts most: he cannot control his house. This is both his punishment and his tragic flaw. When David learns that his son Amnon has raped his daughter Tamar (2 Samuel 13), he is "very angry," but does nothing to punish the crime.⁵⁶ Does he not see the connection we perceive between Amnon's moral violence and his own, or does he refuse to see it?⁵⁷ And does he feel no responsibility or remorse for having fallen prey to Amnon's deception and having sent Tamar to her violent fate? The inadequacy of David's response is indicated by Absalom's equally silent, but ultimately effectual reaction, juxtaposed to it:

When King David heard all these things, he was very angry. But Absalom did not speak to Amnon either good or bad, for Absalom hated Amnon because he had raped Tamar his sister. (2 Sam. 13:21–2)

By doing nothing about the rape David becomes complicit in it. It is left to Absalom, who nurses his hatred for two full years, to avenge Tamar; David appears to have accepted the plight of a forsaken daughter who takes refuge in her brother's (not her father's) house.⁵⁸

David's reaction to Amnon's murder by Absalom receives greater narrative attention than his response to Tamar's disgrace. In fact, the scene in which he learns of the prince's assassination (2 Sam. 13:30–6) contains elements that will reappear in the account of Absalom's death, when David will relive more intensely the trauma of losing his son and heir: the news that comes in two installments and the bitter weeping. At first David is told that "Absalom has slain all the king's sons; not one of them is left." But Jonadab assures the king that he has less reason to despair than he thinks: "Let not my lord the king take it to heart, thinking that all the king's sons are dead, for Amnon alone is dead" (v. 33). This is itself a compromise which David will find bearable. With the passage of time, he can be "comforted about Amnon, for he was dead" (v. 39).

Although David responds more emotionally to Amnon's assassination than to Tamar's rape, once again he does nothing about the crime. His eventual response to Amnon's death is neither insignificant nor uncharacteristic. The reaction of another bereaved father provides a telling contrast. For Jacob, seeing Joseph is dead is reason for *not* being comforted (Gen. 37:35). But for David, who is notorious

for his reaction to the death of Bathsheba's child, there is every reason to believe that he will soon enough get over it. Then there was Solomon to distract his attention; now there is Absalom. According to 2 Sam. 13:37, "David mourned for his son day after day." But which son, Amnon or Absalom? Verse 39 speaks of David's longing for *Absalom*, and the next verse (14:1) informs us, as if to underscore the point, that "Joab the son of Zeruiah knew that the king's mind was on Absalom."

Unlike his tragic predecessor Saul, David does not seek out his destiny but rather lets events unfold as they will. David the pragmatist we have seen all along, biding his time, waiting for the kingship to become his, not seizing it from Saul – in fact, refusing to seize it (1 Samuel 24, 26) – but always ready to take advantage of the moment: accepting Goliath's challenge when Saul and his army are afraid (1 Samuel 17); meeting Saul's outrageous terms in order to become the king's son-in-law (1 Samuel 18); stepping in immediately after Saul's death to become king of Judah (2 Sam. 2:1–4); ready to negotiate with Abner for the northern tribes, but on his own terms (2 Sam. 3:12–14). People close to him – Jonathan, Michal, Abiathar, Abigail with her husband's lands and wealth – even enemies – become allies (from their point of view) like Achish and Abner are stepping-stones, who in one way or another all prove useful to him in his acquisition of power. After the divine judgment of 2 Samuel 12, however, something happens to David. As his tragic fate begins to unfold, David appears no longer prepared to seize the moment by taking initiative himself; he tends rather to *react* to events set in motion by others. Especially when it comes to dealing with his children, his responses are regularly inadequate or inappropriate, and ultimately destructive. It is left to Joab to bring about Absalom's return to Jerusalem, and then to Absalom (after being denied an audience with his father for two years) to seize the initiative and force the king to see him – both important developments that will have fateful consequences.

Joab takes matters into his own hands "in order to turn about the state of things" (2 Sam. 14:20), sending a wise woman to David with a story designed to make the king agree to Absalom's return. In contrast to the way he was taken in by Nathan's parable, David perceives that the woman's story applies to him: "Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?" (v. 19). Has David grown wiser? He is, narratively speaking, coming closer to his moment of tragic recog-

nition, which he will reach through Absalom. David yields to Joab's purpose ("See now, I will do this thing. Go, bring back the youth Absalom," v. 21), but he refuses to participate ("Let him dwell in his house; he is not to see my face," v. 24). His indecision and vacillation – allowing Absalom to return but refusing to see him – make this a particularly portentous compromise. Once again David displays his inability to act firmly when his children are involved.⁵⁹

When David flees Jerusalem before Absalom, he again takes a course of least resistance, without any apparent plan of action (2 Sam. 15:20; 17:16). He plays into the hands of his tragic fate by leaving ten wives of secondary rank to keep his house (2 Sam. 15:16), thus allowing Nathan's prophecy to be fulfilled: "They pitched a tent for Absalom upon the roof, and Absalom went in to his father's wives in the sight of all Israel" (16:22). (When David returns to his house after Absalom's death, still the king, he deals with the matter by putting the ill-treated women away, displaying once again his ability to put an ugly situation behind him, 2 Sam. 20:3.) Another king, at another time, facing the battle in which he would die, eschewed any compromises and deliberately sought out the God who had rejected him, compelled by some inner force to hear again what he already knew (1 Samuel 28). In fleeing from Absalom, David faces a battle that, as far as he knows, could spell the end of his rule and even his death. Shimei, for one, claims that Yhwh has given David's kingdom to Absalom, and calls it divine vengeance for David's crimes against Saul's house (2 Sam. 16:8). David accepts Shimei's cursing as inspired by Yhwh, "Let him alone, let him curse, for Yhwh has bidden him" (16:11). He does not, however, take it as the final word: "It may be that Yhwh will look upon my affliction and that Yhwh will repay me with good for this cursing of me today" (v. 12).

Like Saul, David seeks out the God who has brought judgment upon him, but he does not rely on direct inquiry as he had in earlier days. Does he refrain from asking Yhwh what to do because he can no longer fully trust Yhwh? It is difficult to imagine that David has decided to leave matters in Yhwh's hands,⁶⁰ for if David defers to Yhwh's will, he also acts in his own interest. During his retreat from Jerusalem, he professes, "If I find favor in the eyes of Yhwh, he will bring me back" (15:25), and "let him do to me whatever is good in his eyes" (15:26). But, in the same breath, he sends Jonathan and Ahimaaz back to Jerusalem as spies. He prays to Yhwh to confound the counsel of Ahithophel, but at the same time sends Hushai back to

Jerusalem to defeat Ahithophel's counsel, saying, "If you return to the city... then *you* will defeat for me the counsel of Ahithophel" (15:34). Again we see clearly David the pragmatist, whose desire to provide for every contingency disqualifies him as a true tragic hero.

Only with his moving lament, "My son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom, if only I had died instead of you, Absalom, my son, my son," does David reach the point of tragic recognition, forced as he is to confront the tragic consequences of his actions. I said earlier that there is something suggestive of King Lear in David's lament, as well as in David's extremity as he flees from Absalom. There is also in the moment of tragic recognition something of a lesser tragic hero, Willy Loman, except that the recognition works in reverse. After his son Biff forces him to hear the truth about himself and his illusions, Willy, astonished at the notion his son nevertheless might love him, says, "Isn't that - isn't that remarkable? Biff - he likes me!"⁶¹ David, in effect, says of Absalom, "I really loved him," as if he had not really known it before. For a time he assumes the role of tragic hero, but he cannot sustain it. Joab calls him back to reality by pointing out that this is no way for a king to behave. If, warns Joab, David does not "go out and speak kindly to your servants," the army will abandon him by morning. Having lost his son, David could lose the kingdom too - and, in spite of everything, he *does* want the kingdom.

The king does his duty; he takes his place at the gate for the people to see (2 Sam. 19:8 [Heb. 19:9]). When we next hear of him, he is at work consolidating his position, appealing to the elders of Judah and offering command of the army to Amasa, who had been Absalom's general (19:11-14 [12-15]). David never wrestles, like Saul, to wrench meaning out of his misfortunes, and though he never seems quite to recover from them, he manages with the help of Joab and others to continue with the business of kingship.⁶² The tragic David yields to the pragmatic one. He will later yield to the pathetic one, but still pragmatic enough to give his successor instructions about running the kingdom after he is dead (1 Kings 1-2).

If David's complexity, elusiveness, and impenetrability make him a questionable tragic hero, his flexibility and lack of tragic dignity born of tragic responsibility are the deciding factors. Perhaps he belongs in a class of tragic figures like Willy Loman, Nora Helmer, Blanche Dubois, and J. B., for he does not measure up to an Agamemnon, Antigone, Lear, or Saul. In his willingness to bend, to accommodate himself to fate, he lacks the largeness of spirit that sets

great tragic heroes apart from lesser mortals. He has, as we have seen, his moment of tragic grandeur, but it passes. The real tragedy in the story of David lies in the burden of divine judgment David must bear, and not in his manner of bearing it - a judgment of destruction upon his house, yet to come to an end.

The tragedy of the house of David has only just begun when David dies. The remainder of the Deuteronomistic History, from 1 Kings 3 to 2 Kings 25, chronicles the woeful events that afflict the Davidic house from the division of the kingdom after Solomon's death to the catastrophe of exile. David has begotten a line of kings that will end miserably, even as Saul's house ended miserably - a dynasty whose members, the "good" ones notwithstanding, stumble blindly on to compound the guilt of the house of David so thoroughly that even righteous King Josiah is unable to alter the terrible course of destiny.⁶³ As the Deuteronomistic History closes (2 Kings 25:27-30), some four centuries have elapsed since David's death, and the Davidic king, Jehoiachin, lives out his days in Babylonian captivity, where he "dined regularly at the king's table." Jehoiachin's rueful fate echoes hauntingly the fate of Mephibosheth, the last of the house of Saul, which David displaced.⁶⁴ He, too, was to end his days in virtual house arrest, a pensioner at the royal court. David's house has come to this; its dynastic hopes rest precariously on a Mephibosheth *redivivus*.⁶⁵