



# **King David**

**a novel**

**by**

**John Leonard**

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‘... the story of David and of Amnon are read but not translated.’

Mishnah, *Megillah* 4:10

# I

## Shammah the Scribe

My purpose here is to tell the story of David, King of Judah, King of Israel and of the land of Canaan. Why I am writing his story is firstly because he was a remarkable man, one who served the people well, despite his faults. The second reason is that his story is an episode without parallel in the history of this land, for, until very recently, we had no kings, nor any need of them. Thirdly, although it is only a few years since his death, I have heard so many false reports and untrue stories concerning David the King, that I think it is the duty of someone like me, who knew him well and served in his court, to offer his version of the events surrounding David's life and reign. Finally, as accounts of political life are always valuable, even when they relate to foreign countries, it is my hope that copies of this work will find readers in Egypt, in Syria, in Babylonia, and perhaps in lands beyond. For that reason I have been careful in the narrative to explain carefully the customs of the land in a way that may seem foolish and pedantic to my fellow-countrymen; nevertheless customs vary widely from country to country and many incidents in the narrative will be inexplicable to those not versed in the particular customs of this land, unless I do take care to explain them fully. Similarly I have taken care in the first chapter to describe the topography of the land of Canaan, so that readers who are not familiar with the land will be better able to place the events narrated.

'But,' it will be objected, 'Who is this fellow who boldly offers us an account of his king? and what kind of a history is it that he is writing? since it seems a strange kind of work to us.' Well, my name is Shammah the Scribe, and I served my patron, Abiathar the Priest, as a scribe and adviser for twenty-five years and he, in turn, was one of David's most trusted councillors. Also from a little before the time that David made Jerusalem his capital until a few years before his death I served him as a scribe, as a translator, and as an adviser on dealings with foreign powers. Moreover all my life I have been diligent in gathering historical traditions, stories and records of the land and of the surrounding countries and my service in the royal court allowed me to continue my researches; I have spoken with many of the actors in the present history and heard from their own lips their versions of many of the events narrated here.

As to what kind of history this work is, I believe that it is one which is new. The idea for this type of historical writing came to me many years ago, when I was a young man studying at a scribal school in Egypt. In Egypt they preserve very lengthy and detailed

records of the deeds of their pharaohs, either written and laid up in the Royal Archives, or engraved on the walls of temples. But these records are very puzzling to read and often uninformative, even misleading, for they are of an entirely eulogistic nature; thus even if Pharaoh went on a military campaign and suffered a crushing defeat, such that he only escaped with his life, the narrative would still record a great victory, with spoils and prisoners. Or again, if one of his generals had scored a victory, that victory would be credited to Pharaoh, not to the general. Even if Pharaoh was an imbecile who never left his palace, his reign will be recorded as one of endless triumph. But then, of course, pharaohs are gods. Conversely the Egyptians also have a genre of romance, where the adventures of a commoner, often very improper ones, are related with a great deal of realism and gusto. But these narratives are never about pharaohs, or important people.

It occurred to me then that a history of kings and notables could be written in the popular mode, with great realism and careful attention to historical accuracy and that this history would be more useful and more instructive than the standard eulogistic type of history that is commonly written about great events. And this is the sort of history that I am writing here.

Of course, if this kind of history were to be written in Egypt, or Syria, or Babylonia, then the author would very quickly incur the displeasure of the mighty. For, as I said before, in Egypt pharaohs are gods; in other lands too kings, although not gods, at least partake of divinity. But remember that in our land we have had no kings until the present generation. Even then our king, though of great power and granted the greatest respect by the people, was not above them, and could be criticised and even rebuked by those amongst the people who enjoy authority from them, such as priests and prophets. However, now that we have our monarchy, we are, I think, moving towards a despotism, like that of other lands. Though I write boldly enough, I am unsure as to what reception my narrative will meet; of this only I am sure, that in it I have related the events of the story as accurately and as dispassionately as possible; I have recorded my own opinions so that any bias in the work unperceived by its author can be corrected by its readers, and whilst I have not slandered anyone, neither have I flattered anyone, or glossed over any uncomfortable facts.

One word more of prologue. Before I begin to relate the story of King David it will be necessary to relate that of his unfortunate predecessor, Saul, and of Samuel, the priest who anointed him. And before that I will have to relate the prior history of the land of Canaan, in which these events unfolded. I should also say that in this first section I am relating legends and stories, eked out with only a few concrete details. When we come to the events of Saul's life I am using various individual versions of the events, noted by me from eyewitnesses to these events (though in the case of a serious conflict of fact I give both versions). When we

come to the time of King David, however, I myself was eyewitness to many of the events, and when I was not, I have obtained trustworthy accounts from those who were.

## II

### **The Land of Canaan and its People**

I have written a couple of times already the phrase ‘the land of Canaan’. Yet properly our land has no name. ‘Canaan’ is the name given to it by the Egyptians and the word itself comes from the murex shellfish, which yields royal purple dye. Obviously this shellfish is only found along the coast, but the coastal plain does not really belong to our land. Nor does anyone within its borders think of themselves as ‘Canaanites’. Another name that is sometimes applied to the inhabitants of the land is ‘Hebrews’, and some are prepared to think of themselves as ‘Hebrews’; on the other hand many do not accept this name, as they know that it was an opprobrious one given originally by the Egyptians and Babylonians to various groups of Aramaean mercenaries, and that its import was little better than ‘bandit’.

Perhaps before talking about the people I had better describe the land. Parallel with the coast of the Great Sea is a chain of mountainous uplands that stretches 150 miles north from the Negeb Desert to Tyre, north of which the range parts in two and Aram begins. The country along the coast below this range is uniformly low-lying, except where a spur of the range approaches the coast south of Tyre. In the south the peaks of the range rise high above the coastal plain, but further north the range is lower and more broken, and there are several low valleys. Behind the range is, in the north, the Sea of Chinnereth, a fresh-water lake 15 miles long, and from this issues the River Jordan, which flows south some 70 miles until it enters the Salt Sea, a great lake more saline than the Great Sea, and which has no outlet. Beyond this deep valley the land is bounded, from north to south, by the countries of Aram, Bashan, Geshur, Ammon, Moab and Edom.

To return west again—the coastal plain is fertile in places, but mostly sandy, hot and dry. The lower slopes of the western side of the range are the most fertile areas of the land, and here barley, vines, olives and other fruits and crops are grown. On the higher parts of the range and on the drier, eastern slopes crops can only be grown in a few places and the main activity is the herding of sheep and goats. Towards the Jordan there are more fertile areas again, but down near the Salt Sea is all desert. A main highway runs east of the Salt Sea and the Jordan through Edom and Moab north. Another highway runs along the highest part of the range north through Hebron, Jerusalem and so to Shechem. On the coast another road runs north through Gaza, Joppa and so on to Tyre.

As to the people who live along this range and in the areas immediately adjacent to it, they are a very mixed population. It is said that the first man who ever lived, Adam, is buried

at Hebron; but I expect that every country claims the earliest man for its own, so I attach no importance to this myth. Again there are many legends of the early inhabitants of the land, but the earliest events that can be relied upon concern several groups of Aramaeans from northern Syria, nomads and their flocks, who, many generations ago, descended on the land. Traditions record that there were groups led by, or who claimed descent from, Abraham, which settled around Hebron in the south, Isaac, which settled in the far south around Beersheba, Jacob, which settled around Bethel in the centre of the range, and Israel, which settled around Shechem in the central north. When they arrived in the land they found it inhabited by ‘the Jebusites, the Amorites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, the Arkites, the Sinites, the Arvadites, the Zemarites, and the Hamathites’, or, according to another version of the same list ‘the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites’.

But this is all ancient history and few of these groups are now extant, for it seems that the Aramaeans effected a reorganisation of the peoples of the land, and most groups now living here would claim descent from them, rather than from any prior people. But, at the same time, to claim descent from nomads, rather than from autochthonous elements, is not to claim any very noble parentage. Indeed there is a joke amongst us that when anyone is asked who their ancestors were, they reply, ‘a wandering Aramaean was my father’. And in fact the various legends and tales of the early Aramaean settlers are most unreliable and even in the same district contradictory genealogies and histories are often in circulation. Moreover the actual settlement patterns found do not imply any simple movements of people or settlement, but a confused overlay of different movements and settlements at different times. My own people, for example, the tribe of Judah, hold that they are descended from Abraham, but no one agrees whether ‘Abraham’ is the name of a tribe, or a person, or whether Judah, who *is* agreed to have been a real person, was Abraham’s son, grandson, or more remote descendent. And then we have the anomaly that despite the fact that the most important town in the territory of Judah is Hebron, the inhabitants of Hebron and the surrounding areas mostly claim to be descendants of Caleb the Edomite, who is held to have been a real person who lived some ten generations ago, and these Calebites revere as their ancestor Esau, who is held to have been a rival of Jacob the Aramaean.

I have now begun to describe the present peoples of the lands, and I had better continue. As I said the tribe of Judah inhabits the southern part of the range, along with other groups, notably the Calebites. In the centre of the range live, to the west, the Gibeonites, and, to the east, the Benjamites. The Benjamites are a strange, warlike people and perpetually at odds with the Gibeonites. Amidst the Benjamites live the Jebusites, principally in the city of Jerusalem. North of these live the tribe of Joseph, which has two moieties, Ephraim and



Manasseh. Half of the tribe of Manasseh live across the Jordan and the other on the western side; Ephraim lives in the highlands. In the north are various other peoples, some of whom are allies of Joseph, or, as these tribes style themselves, 'Israel', after the ancestor associated with Shechem, the father, some say, of Joseph. The Danites of the far north are one such group. But other northern groups have traditional allegiances with Judah. As a southerner I am less familiar with the intricacies of northern tribal politics, and naturally I regard Benjamin and Joseph as barbarous, warlike and troublesome people; the northerners, for their part, believe Judah to be as equally turbulent and warlike.

However, it is not simply a question of which tribe someone belongs to with us, for, a man first of all identifies with his family, then with his wider family, then with the town or district he lives in. And there is so much intermarriage and movement around the land that I would say it would be impossible to find anyone whose allegiance is purely to one tribe, or one place. For example my own family, natives of Hebron in Judah, are of mixed origin, some of my forebears came from Edom, others from the far north of Canaan, and, as the story I am about to tell unfolds, various other tangled webs of allegiances will have to be teased out.

But I have not yet described the half of the complexity that is this land. For, in some parts of the world, as, for example, Arabia, people are lucky enough to be able to live without the interference of outside powers, and in these countries any problems the people have are of their own making. But since the beginning of time Canaan has been the frontier between Egypt and whatever power happened to rule in Syria. Whenever either Egypt or Syria was strong, one or other power, or both, would seek to rule Canaan. In the campaigning season mighty armies would march north and south up and down the major highways, fighting with each other, or with rebels in the land. But these armies, though they would loot and destroy along the route of these highways, were not half so troublesome to the people of the land as the garrison cities that Egypt and Syria maintained. The major cities of the land, Gaza, Megiddo, Tyre, Jerusalem were always maintained as garrisons by one or other of the two powers—the extent of the influence of either side could be gauged by which of these cities either side controlled. In times when the power of Egypt and Syria was very great every walled city was a garrison, every side road had customs posts along it to extort goods and money from the unfortunate people of the land. However, most of the time neither Egypt nor Syria has had the power to control every corner of the land. And in any case, even though the cities might have contained foreign mercenaries and been ruled by foreign governors they were still peopled by the people of the land, relatives and friends of those who continued to live more traditional lives in small towns and villages in the high country. And indeed there was constant movement between the cities and the country. When Egypt and Syria were

powerful people would move to the towns to make money by trade, as staying on the land would mean being ruined by taxes and pillage. When the major powers declined, so did the cities, the garrisons were not paid, merchants ceased to trade in Canaan, and the city-folk would begin to drift back to the hills.

So far my foreign readers will have gathered that the land of Canaan is nothing but a cockpit of squabbling tribes, a border wasteland perpetually contested by great powers and it will not have surprised many of them to learn that the land has never had kings, or been united. (In fact I should say that from time to time various of the governors of the cities have styled themselves 'king', but what respect can a king enjoy whose kingdom extends five miles beyond the city-walls and no further?) On the other hand my fellow-countrymen reading this account will hardly think that I am describing my native land here, as I have given so bleak an account. For, they will argue, this land is a very pleasant one, and in places marvellously fertile; it has some of the most ancient cities and most revered shrines in the world; its people are among the most trustworthy and religiously-given and that, finally, although many wars have taken place in and over the land, Canaan does not differ in this from any other corner of the world, and that sometimes generations can go by without a conflict of any importance.

There is some truth in these views, and indeed one could fill many scrolls of paper setting down the rival accounts of these matters. However, having already laid down why our land is not a nation of one people, like Egypt, I will go on briefly to explain why there is nevertheless some sort of unity to be found amongst the various peoples of the land. Firstly we all speak the same language, which I take it is the language of our Aramaean ancestors. It differs only slightly amongst the various groups of people here, and all varieties of it are mutually intelligible, whereas our language is not the same as any of those spoken in Syria or Babylonia, nor is it the same as Egyptian, or the languages of the kingdoms to the east, or those of the nomads to the south, and all these languages must be learnt by one of the people of the land if he is to understand them. There are, it must be said, a few villages where older languages are still spoken and several religious shrines still have documents and liturgical texts in other languages. But these are only understood by a few and are not general. Moreover other groups of people who come from outside the land to settle invariably adopt our language as their own within a few generations. The Benjamites, for example, who are said to have come from the west, across the sea, within the last ten generations (though others hotly dispute this), are said to have had their own language when they arrived, though now their speech is no different from that of Judah.

And then we share the same religion. The deities worshipped in this land are El (which means 'Lord God') and his consort, the Lady Asherah. Both these deities are

worshipped at numerous shrines all over the country, although the titles of El vary from place to place. For example at Beersheba he is El Olam ('The Eternal God'), at Hebron he is El Shaddai ('God of the Hills'), at Jerusalem he is El Elyon ('God most High'), at Bethel he is simply El (Bethel means 'House of El') and at Shechem El Berith ('God of the Covenant'). His nature is different from that of Egyptian or Babylonian gods, for, as you would expect of deities of great and powerful lands, these gods are so powerful and aloof that they disdain to take any notice of anyone less important than a king or a pharaoh, leaving the lesser gods to handle the affairs of lesser men. El, on the other hand, though powerful and mighty, does govern the affairs of everyone, and his worshippers, both collectively and individually, must all obey his will in all things, which is that all should deal justly and with forbearance with one another, and even with foreigners and domestic animals justice and mercy are enjoined in all our dealings. On the other hand El is a god whose anger is easily kindled and once it is kindled he is implacable until the offender is pursued and slain and his transgression atoned for. His consort, the Lady Asherah, concerns herself with the fertility of the land, with the emotions of love, with domestic matters and with the petitions of women. Although everyone worships El and all great oaths are sworn by him and he is called upon in times of great emergency, everyone would much sooner deal with his wife, and to this day most requests and vows are made to her, who is kindly and forgiving and not at all wrathful. There is hardly anyone in this land who does not carry about two or three little lucky figurines blessed at a shrine of hers, and there is hardly a building or house that does not have a small collection of such figures in every room. At the various shrines around the land El has altars, but Asherah is always worshipped at a wooden pillar, or at a small shrine under a living tree.

In some parts of the land, particularly in the cities, another god is worshipped, namely Baal, who is thought of as a young storm-god and usually explained as the son of El and Asherah. Just as young men are more impetuous and head-strong than older men, so Baal is considered, though, just as younger men are more quickly moved to anger, but then can just as quickly forget their anger, so Baal's wrath is not considered half as awesome as that of his father.

These three deities are worshipped in much the same way as the gods of other lands, that is to say by ceremonies, processions, hymns, intercessions and sacrifices. In return they give omens and oracles and inspire warriors and prophets, and grant peace and prosperity to those who behave according to their commands, and bring death and disaster to those who do not.

As you would expect from such religious uniformity the festivals of the year are celebrated in much the same way throughout the land. In early spring, after the winter rains have ended, we celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread, that is to say we make a virtue of

eating plain food, all we have left after the winter. It is also at this time that our herdsmen slaughter the animals that they are not going to keep through into the next year. The next festival is the First-Fruits in summer, after the grain crops have been harvested. The final, and most important, festival is the Ingathering in autumn, at the time of the grape-harvest, when people go to live in tents in the vineyards for a few days and when there is much revelry and ribaldry.

So far I have not described anything that is very different from the worship offered the gods in any other land, except of course, you must understand that our festivals and shrines are much more modest and more homely than those of other lands. However there is one aspect of religion in our land which is, I believe, unique to it and is also a aspect of the unity-in-diversity of the land that I mentioned earlier. This is various roles that religious leaders play in the land, as priests, prophets and judges. Now priests with us are much the same as priests anywhere, that is to say, they order the worship and festivals of their shrine, they consult lots and interpret omens and oracles, they advise on religious matters, supervise oaths made to the deities and legal contracts made before the altar and so forth. Prophets, on the other hand, need not necessarily be priests, but usually are, as religious learning is considered a prerequisite for their calling. Prophets prophesy; that is, they speak, often in cryptic fashion and poetic form, in the name of El, or Asherah, or Baal. They do this either when asked, or unbidden. Some prophets live at the religious centres, others tour the country giving vent to prophesy. Some are quite mad, and only speak nonsense, some speak sense intermittently, and a few very rare ones give excellent advice at all times. No one will ever abuse a prophet, or fail to listen politely to him, but again, no one is obliged to follow a prophet's advice or exhortation, and the extent to which a prophet can influence events is therefore dependent on how persuasive and how sensible his advice really is. Other prophets claim to consult the dead, but there are few of these.

Finally judges, this is the office that will appear to be the strangest of all to readers in foreign lands. But remember, we have had no kings in the land until recently, and therefore various parts of the duties that kings perform in other lands have had to be spread around amongst the leading men of the land. A judge can be prophet, and a priest as well, but often is not. At times women have been judges, and their names are still revered. (Women, incidentally, can also prophesy, but as it is more difficult for them to travel round the land unmolested, women-prophets usually stay in one place). Judges are called upon by the people, or by priests, to judge inter-tribal disputes. This is a most difficult task because customs vary between the tribes and an exact and up-to-date knowledge is required on the part of judges to decided what has happened, and who is in the right; it is also a thankless task, since it is very difficult to effect what is usually required, namely a compromise, and

failing that, the judge can only please one party to the dispute, which is the same as continuing the dispute. Nevertheless there have been several notable judges in the past. Another role that judges play is to lead the people of the land in battle against their enemies, foreigners who seek to oppress the people. Once a judge has achieved military success, he is then usually called upon to act in a judicial capacity over the his own, and surrounding, districts for the rest of his life. Samuel and Saul were the last men to act in this capacity in the land, before Samuel, who was also a priest, anointed Saul King, as we shall shortly see, and indeed the wonder is that no judges were ever successful in making themselves King before. However I should say that Judah, though it has priests and prophets, has never had judges, as it has rarely been attacked by foreigners and as there is a permanent council of the Elders of the tribe to act as judges in all disputes.

I fear to try the patience of the readers with yet more on the history and institutions of this land, but there are two further things that need to be related before I can begin the story proper. And they both concern the arrival in the land of foreign groups. Both these events took place some ten generations ago, one was the arrival in the land of 'Israel', which as I mentioned before consists of the twin tribes of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh. The dominant position of these tribes in the centre of the land is explained by the fact that they are recent arrivals. What seems to have happened, as far one can tell from the legends that they have, sifting them carefully to sort from them all fantastic elements, or elements that can only have been added with hindsight, with the intention of magnifying the actors, or glossing over some embarrassing fact or other, is that a generation before they appeared in the land a group from the tribe of Joseph escaped from their contract-labouring in Egypt under the command of a Egyptian prince. This prince had some sort of obsession with a new god, who, he claimed, would lead the tribe through Sinai and back into the land of Canaan from whence they had emigrated generations earlier. The tribe travelled across Sinai and attempted to enter the land from the south, they were repulsed and spent the next thirty years at the oasis of Kadesh-barnea gathering allies. They had by now rejected their Egyptian prince and his god and had taken up with another god they met on their travels, a golden bull. They also had a new leader, one Joshua.

After a generation had gone by Joshua led the tribe around via Edom and Moab and crossed the Jordan north of the Salt Sea, leaving a part of the tribe of Manasseh on the eastern side. Then, in cooperation with the tribe of Benjamin, which had recently, according to some accounts, entered the land from the coast and which had taken up residence in the central highlands, the tribes of Joseph stormed into the land, taking city after city by surprise; Jericho, Bethel and Ai fell in quick succession. It was then that the Benjamites did a very clever thing. Had they continued in their alliance with Joseph and continued warring against

the cities of central Canaan, they may have carved out for themselves a considerable patrimony, but as Joseph was much more numerous, it could only have been at the expense of being swallowed up in Joseph. What the Benjamites did was to point out to Joshua that the highlands to the north were sparsely populated, but at the same time well-wooded, which indicated their fertility. 'Why not,' they said, 'Turn north and inhabit that land, where there is space for much pasture, much crop land, but, as yet, few people and fewer cities'. They also pointed out to them the enormous strategic importance of these highlands; anyone controlling them could sweep down east, west, or north, on the lower country, and control that too. Joshua took up their idea and the tribe of Joseph moved north to occupy what became known as the Hill Country of Ephraim and to capture the principal city of the region, Shechem. Benjamin, on the other hand, was left in possession of several important cities, and in control of its own territory.

For the next few generations the tribe of Joseph made itself a thorough nuisance to its neighbours by its continued expansion and warfare; one half of the tribe, Ephraim, remained in the hill-country, but the other, Manasseh, spread out north and east to the Jordan, and linked up again with those members of the tribe that had remained east of the Jordan. On the other hand the tribes did begin to adapt themselves to the conditions of the land. Although in their wanderings they had picked up many strange customs, their basic way of life and their language showed their claim to have originally been descended from our Aramaean ancestors not to have been untrue. When they captured Shechem they discovered that Israel was the ancestor revered there and soon they discovered that they too were descendants of Israel, as Joseph was his son, a fact they had forgotten until that time! Thus they began to call themselves 'Israel'. They also adapted their Bull-God to the worship of El at Shechem, in that they began to worship the golden bull as El. Finally after a war with all the other groups in the north, backed by Judah and the Gibeonites, Israel, and its ally Benjamin was worsted and forced to make a peace. At Shechem, where El had for generations been worshipped as 'the Lord of the Covenant' (that is to say the covenant between the people of the land and their God), they joined this covenant, promising no longer to seek to dominate the whole of the land, or to oppress other groups in it. The other groups of the people of the land, for their part, agreed to accept Israel as the most important power in the north, much as Judah was in the south.

Thus, from being wild and troublesome interlopers the tribes of Joseph had become a part of the land. Yet there is one further thing to add to this. Although the Golden Bull at Shechem was the most sacred object in Israel, there was another sacred object belonging to them, a large, battered wooden chest, laid up at the shrine of Shiloh, south of Shechem. Some said that this was part of the religious paraphernalia of the Egyptian prince, and that it

contained Egyptian religious texts, others said that it was a thunder-chest, that is, a wooden chest inside which a sacred meteoric stone was rolled to simulate thunder and, by sympathetic magic, to make rain fall. Others again say that it was simply empty, and no more than a metaphor for the Egyptian prince's ineffable god, who is everywhere and nowhere, and whom the ignorant may style El, but whom the wise know by his secret holy name. But of course, as it was sacred, no one could approach it to find out what it did contain, and it remains a potent mystery. We will hear more of this chest as our story unfolds.

But the last thing that needs to be related by way of historical introduction is the arrival in the land, at the same time as the arrival of Israel, of the Philistines, our most feared enemies and one foreign group that has never adapted to the land, but always sought to dominate it. The Philistines are not Aramaeans like us, some say that they are Greeks, or Phrygians. Their language is harsh and guttural and they are a cruel, fanatical people, with cruel, blood-thirsty gods, to whom they offer regular human sacrifices. They first arrived on the coast in flotillas of small, swift ships, shortly after an attack by them on Egypt was bought off by the Egyptians at the price of a contract with them to take over the garrisoning of the cities of the southern coastal plain: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron and Gath. They landed on the coast and instead of showing their warrants and being installed as mercenary-garrisons simply stormed the cities and put their inhabitants to the sword. They then took over the whole of the coastal plain and made it their own. Up to then this plain had been sparsely populated, apart from the cities, because of the danger of pirates. But now the pirates had taken over and they took care to maintain naval patrols to guard themselves against any other groups of sea-bourne adventurers. As they had seized the cities they were secure against all attack by land. In the next few generations they advanced from the coastal plain, which is not particularly fertile, into the foothills of the range, and wrested these foothills from Judah and its allies. However beyond this they could not advance, as the Philistine method of warfare is based on heavily-armoured infantry, backed by chariots, and this method is not well suited to mountainous country. Thus in the south a border was quickly defined. In the north however the Philistine strategy was to march north of the central massif, and turn inland up one or other of the valleys that run in to the Hill Country of Ephraim. Here things were more evenly matched as the Philistines were far from their own country, but the Ephraimites and their allies were fighting in less mountainous terrain. For several generations the warfare swayed back and forth, first one side had the advantage, then the other, but as time went on the Philistines became stronger and stronger; nor did they ever make any secret of the fact that they were not interested in reaching a compromise and living alongside the other peoples of the land, but instead their purpose was to conquer the whole of the land, and to enslave or drive out everyone in their way.

This was the situation in the Land of Canaan when our narrative proper begins, two generations before the present time.



### III

## Samuel the Priest

The first of the three most important figures in our story was Samuel. Samuel was an Ephraimite, and, as he had been born to his mother after many years of childlessness, and only when she offered special prayers at Shiloh, he was dedicated to El, as the custom is. He was sent to Shiloh when he was about ten years old, (this was the Israelite shrine where the sacred wooden chest was kept), and apprenticed to the priest Eli. Once, I believe, amongst us priests were appointed by the people, who chose from amongst those who felt a religious calling. However, as time has gone on the various cultic centres have become richer and acquired many new functions, and priests began to hand on their office to their sons, to keep the wealth of the shrine in their family. Eli, who was well advanced in years when Samuel came to Shiloh, had two grown sons already, Hophni and Phineas, so Samuel could not expect to succeed him. Nevertheless he loved him well and rapidly learned everything Eli could tell him about the functions of a priest and the administrative duties of the office. But he also grew in holiness; it is said that El spoke directly to him on occasions and early in life he became 'filled with El', as we say. Those who are filled with El are usually stern and terrible people, they partake of El's judgement and righteousness, but they also share his wrath. People who knew Samuel well said that his whole life was the embodiment of virtue, but that no one loved him, and all feared him. I myself saw him once, when I was a young man, just before I went to Egypt; he was not particularly tall, but his bearing and his presence were powerful. No one could look him in the eye, and no one wanted to oppose anything he did. If I close my eyes I can see him still in his flowing robes, with his great grizzled beard and huge brows.

As Eli's sons were to take over the priesthood at Shiloh, Samuel, when he reached manhood, moved to the small shrine of Ramah, to the south within the borders of Benjamin, where he was offered the priesthood.

At about the same time the Philistines advanced towards the borders of Ephraim, and encamped at Aphek. An army of Ephraimites attempted to block their advance, but, as usual, they were out-manoeuvred by the Philistines, who, remember, were mostly professional soldiers and were much better equipped. Part of the Ephraimite army was surrounded and a thousand men were killed. The Philistines continued to advance into the hills. The Ephraimites then sent to Shiloh for the sacred chest, as Shiloh was the closest shrine and as the chest had been taken out and used in similar situations before. It was taken down the

valley to the Ephraimite army and its presence provoked such joy and confidence that, with a great shout, the men advanced immediately on the enemy. The Philistines were taken by surprise and hard-pressed for a little while, but they rallied, pushed the Ephraimites back to their camp and overran them; there was a great slaughter and almost no one escaped, the sacred chest was captured and Eli's two sons, who had accompanied it, were also killed.

That evening a Benjamite who had escaped from the battle ran into Shiloh. He found Eli, by now very old and blind, sitting at the gate of the shrine, waiting for news. The man said to him:

'I have come with news; I fled from the battle today.'

'What news, stranger?' Eli asked, trembling.

'Ephraim has fled before the Philistines, and there has been a great slaughter amongst the people. The sacred chest has been captured and your two sons are dead'.

Eli fell backwards off his seat and was dead when they picked him up.

The Philistines continued their advance towards Shiloh the next day and captured the shrine and the town and razed them to the ground. It was the greatest victory that the Philistines had ever scored over the people of the land and from the position they were now in it seemed that the north at least lay open to them. But, like all professional soldiers, the Philistines were very cautious—they had marched through the centre of Ephraim, destroyed two armies and captured the second most important shrine in the country. But Shechem to the north was a walled city, also to the north were many more of Ephraim's allies; to the south was Benjamin and its walled cities, and behind them the Gibeonites, who were as yet uncommitted, but who could block their escape if they went on to suffer a reverse. Wisely the Philistines decided to retreat, contenting themselves with a signal victory and the possession of the sacred chest.

The fate of the chest was this: the Philistines took it back with them to their land and they laid it up first in a temple at Ashdod. They believed that a captured sacred object does honour to the temple it is housed, and I think most people believe this too, certainly we have put sacred objects captured from the Philistines in shrines in our land. But shortly after this the chest was taken out and taken to Ekron, and the reason for this is that although the Philistines are divided into five kingdoms, after the five cities they first captured, they do everything in concert and no one has ever divided them amongst themselves (this is the main reason why they are so successful in war). Thus the expedition, though it set out from Ekron, was a joint-expedition, and all the spoils were shared equally amongst the five cities. The chest, it had been decided, was to be sent around the five cities in turn and put on display in each. After being exhibited at Ekron, the chest was being taken to Ashkelon, when, by coincidence, a raiding party from Judah ambushed the convoy and captured the chest. It was

immediately recognised for what it was and conveyed reverently into Judah, to the town of Kiriath-jearim where it was housed at the local shrine. The men of the neighbourhood at first thought of sending the chest back to Ephraim, but then thoughts of immediate advantage entered their minds and they commissioned a priest specifically to look after the chest. A few months later a deputation arrived from Ephraim to request the return of the chest, but they politely sent it on its way. The land was too dangerous, the members of the delegation were told, Shiloh has not yet been rebuilt and it was unlikely to be rebuilt anyway; perhaps, the elders of the town insinuated, El has withdrawn his favour from you, if he allowed his sacred chest to be captured so easily. And so the Ephraimites returned empty-handed. The truth is, of course that the elders of the town and of Judah were overjoyed at having in protective custody one of Israel's most sacred objects, and they knew that the stream of Ephraimites coming south to pay their respects to the chest would soon make their town much more important than it was before.

Samuel, meanwhile, knew that it was most important for the people of the land to gain some sort of victory during that campaigning season, so that the memory of the Philistine's victory would be effaced with that of a reverse. He called the Benjamites together at Mizpah, the nearest large town to Ramah. No one expected anyone to appear, for Samuel was in those days unknown, but strangely enormous numbers of people turned out, for, I have heard it said, Samuel's divine afflatus could also operate at a distance. At Mizpah Samuel berated the Benjamites for not helping the Ephraimites, though this was unjust as the Philistine's campaign had been so rapid that there would have been no time to summon Benjamin anyway. After this he led the Benjamites west until they came to the nearest Philistine garrison, this they turned out and advanced on the next. After a few days a relief party arrived from Philistia, and, after a series of clever manoeuvres and a display of unwonted discipline on the part of the Benjamites under the stern eye of Samuel, the Philistines were forced to retreat, leaving many dead.

After this Samuel became a judge in time-honoured fashion in the district around Ramah, and in the cities of Mizpah, Gilgal and Bethel. His judgements were good and he was revered. He also took up arms when necessary against the Philistines and hardly a year went by when he did not lead the Benjamites successfully against them. He showed a surprisingly good grasp of military strategy for someone who up to early manhood had had no experience of warfare. He was the most notable man amongst the people of the land for forty years because of these victories.

Yet despite this the Philistines continued to grow in strength. At about the time of their expedition to Shiloh the Philistines had adopted a new strategy. Before they had simply campaigned and fought against the people of the land, hoping to drive them before them. But

this had not been wholly successful and the lords of the five cities decided on a different approach. They still campaigned and advanced the frontier of Philistia where they could (in Samuel's day the whole of the sea-board north to Mt Carmel fell into their hands), but they also began to enter into alliances, first with many of the cities of central Canaan, then with the Gibeonites. Over and above this they began to recruit agents and sympathisers all over the land to spy for them, to report on developments and to murder, if they could, anti-Philistine leaders. Finally they began to take over the economy of the land; with the help of the cities they established a network of garrisons and customs-posts to extort money from travellers and to keep an eye on movements. They also at this time established a monopoly over the technology of iron-working, which was then a great mystery. The Philistines had a register of all smiths and they all had to dwell in Philistine, or allied, cities. Anyone wanting iron tools, or wanting their tools repaired, had to go to one of these cities and declare their name and details to the authorities before they were allowed have what they wanted. And the Philistines tried to keep iron *weapons* wholly to themselves.

Against this kind of warfare-in-peace, which was similar to the control exercised over the land in the days when Egypt and Syria were strong and contested it, leaders like Samuel had no answer. Even though he might win a series of victories over the Philistines, each year he saw their power grow stronger and stronger. As time went on he realised that there were spies wherever he went and that all his movements were watched. He knew that at any time he could be murdered if the Philistines thought that the outpouring of anger of the people that would ensue on his death would be less troublesome than his continued existence. He sent his sons away into the comparative safety of Judah, where they became priests at Beersheba. But he continued to live at Ramah, in lonely near-imprisonment.

Finally El spoke to him and he conceived a plan. He sent secret emissaries all over the land to summon the whole of the land to an assembly at Ramah on a certain date. His plan was that a large enough number of people would assemble so that he could immediately declare war on the Philistines and sweep them and their garrisons out of the land. For simply by turning up everyone would already have committed themselves, as the Philistines would learn of their actions the next day and probably move to crush the rebellion instantly. Sure enough a large number of people turned up, almost all the tribe of Benjamin, most of Ephraim, many people from the north and a strong contingent from Judah, for the Philistines' oppressions had now reached such a level that everyone was convinced of the need for some sort of rebellion.

However the assembly did not behave in the way Samuel had expected; he had assumed, no doubt, that his course of action was the only possible one and that therefore the assembly would endorse his plan. But instead, when he had harangued the assembly and put

it to them that an immediate revolt was the only answer to the woes of the land, the assembly did something astonishing, they asked Samuel to anoint a king over them to lead them in battle. They pointed out that Samuel, although a great leader, was old, and his sons were far away and had given no signs of leaderly qualities. They realised that the war against the Philistines was not going to be won by one or two old-fashioned popular campaigns, but by creating in the land a political system which could contest on equal terms the Philistines' mechanism of control. Samuel told the people very frankly what would happen to them if they did get the king they wanted, and these are his words:

These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and make them charioteers and horsemen and infantrymen. He will appoint regional and local commanders, and will assume large estates, worked by forced labour, to support his household and employ many craftsmen on large salaries. He will take your daughters and make them domestic servants in his palace. He will take away the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his employees, and he will also take a tithe-tax of all your other produce and give it them. He will take away your servants and the best of your domestic animals and set them to work and he will take a tenth of your flocks. And you will be his slaves and will bitterly lament that you ever asked for a king over the land.

But the people preferred the prospect of immediate deliverance from present oppression over that of future tyranny, and continued to clamour for a king.

Samuel retired to his shrine and sent out messengers to the elders of the people, telling them to say: 'Samuel says he will anoint a king, but give out to the people that he has refused absolutely, and take your people home as quickly as you can. When your king is anointed you will hear again.'

Samuel said this because he knew that the Philistines would hear of the meeting, if there were not already spies at the gathering, and move quickly to kill him and any king he might have appointed there and then. If, however, they learnt that the meeting broke up in disagreement they might decide to do nothing.

Samuel had an obvious candidate for the kingship, Saul the son of Kish, a man of Benjamin, aged about forty. He in fact had already acted once in the capacity of a judge in the old way, when, some years before, the town of Jabesh-gilead just across the Jordan had been besieged by the Ammonites. Saul led an army of relief, which, because it arrived unexpectedly, defeated the Ammonites and sent them fleeing back into their own land. Saul was a very handsome man, of commanding presence, and very tall, at least a head taller than any other man in the land.

Samuel then had to bring Saul to him, and to send him around the cities of Benjamin to make him known to the chief men of the land, so that, on a pre-arranged day, a general revolt could break out. This would be led by Saul, who would then gather the other people of the land to his banner. To this end Samuel sent more messengers around to arrange the whole

process. He was, incidentally, lucky in that, because of his long career, he was known to most of the elders in the land and in that there was always a constant stream of worshippers coming to Ramah and going away. By these people he could send messages all over the land and when he did so he took care that these messages were cryptic and that the carrier did not usually know what the message meant, but only the recipient did. Thus even if the Philistines were to capture a messenger and torture him, they would not understand the message he was carrying, and the messenger could not tell them either. Saul, alerted by one of these messengers, set out the next day from Gibeah, his home-town, a little to the south of Ramah. Two hours' walk would have brought them to Samuel, but Saul and his servant went off on a circular route, saying they were looking for some lost asses. They entered Ramah from the north the next day, and gave out that they were strangers who wanted to consult the priest about their lost asses (as though a great priest and judge like Samuel would concern himself with lost animals!) and went up to his house. As previously arranged, they found Samuel and the chief men of the district at dinner; Samuel led Saul to the highest seat and offered him the best cuts of meat—this was the sign that Saul was to be King, though nothing was said by anyone on the subject. The next day Saul departed and just before he did so Samuel privately took oil and anointed him King and told him where to go next.

He told him that first he was to go to Zelzah, to a local shrine, and there he would meet a group of men who would say to him: 'The asses you went to seek are found, now your father is worried about his son.' Then he was to go to the sacred tree at Tabor, near Bethel, where three men would meet him, one carrying three kids, another three loaves of bread and the third, a skin of wine; the second man would give him two of the three loaves. After that he was to go to Gibeath-elohim, where he would meet a company of prophets with musical instruments and dance with them. Then he was to go home, and then to Samuel again at Mizpah. Now of course all these events were prearranged to show to the chief people of these districts who their new King was, before he was publicly proclaimed. And everything happened as arranged at Zelzah, and Tabor, though at Gibeath-elohim, Saul was so affected by the drugged wine that the prophets gave him, never having tasted it before, that he danced vigorously for hours and raved incoherently and in such an undignified fashion that he had to be taken home and put to bed. And the people of the town said, half in wonder, half in amusement, 'Is Saul also amongst the prophets?'

From his home Saul set out a few days later for Mizpah, still with not a word of his kingship being breathed by anyone, though by now almost anyone in Benjamin knew the secret. At Mizpah, Samuel finally proclaimed him King publically though a very comic incident ensued. Saul had been waiting for the announcement, but after some time finally could wait any longer before going to relieve himself. He walked away from the assembly to

find a secluded spot, which he did behind the area where the people had left their baggage and their asses. Samuel consulted sacred lots and proclaimed him, of all the people, the one best suited to be King, but he was nowhere to be found; eventually as he returned he was hailed as King. But Samuel turned even this embarrassment around when he announced that El had provided the land with a King who was so modest that he felt bashful at being called to such a high office.

After this assembly the general revolt that Samuel had hoped would have broken out spontaneously a week earlier now broke out and it was a much more effective one for having had a week of planning. The Philistines were taken completely by surprise, they had assumed that Samuel's assembly at Ramah had been a failure and a demonstration of their tight grasp on the land. A week later Benjamin had a King and was united in arms. All the smaller Philistine garrisons were overwhelmed, or fled, all known Philistine spies or sympathisers were either murdered or driven out, the customs post were sacked and men flocked to Saul's army. Saul had the command of all of the western part of the territory of Benjamin and that of southern Ephraim and he and Samuel next travelled to Gilgal in the east of Benjamin, down near the Jordan, to receive acclamation from the people of that part of Benjamin. This they did and more men joined Saul's cause. Samuel and Saul both knew that although the Philistines had been driven out of Benjamin, they needed only a short time to regroup and prepared an expedition to punish their rebellious subjects, for so they thought of the people of Benjamin. And that it would be very important to be able to counter this expedition decisively.

## IV

### Samuel and King Saul

The Philistine response to the revolt was swifter than either Samuel or Saul could have imagined. Within a few weeks a huge army, partly made up of new forces, partly of the garrisons that had fled towards the coast in the first days of the revolt and had been rallied and reorganised, marched up the main road from the coast into the centre of the territory of Benjamin, and encamped at the town of Michmash. Before this army appeared Saul had returned from Gilgal and begun to organise the men who had turned out to support him into an army around Bethel, and his son Jonathan did a similar job in the south of Benjamin, around Saul's home town of Gibeah. The priority for both was to sort out from a large and disorganised mass those men who had had military experience, and to equip them with good swords, spears and whatever armour could be scraped together from amongst the people and from the spoils of the Philistine garrisons. For Saul knew that no huge popular levy armed with flails and scythes would serve the people in this campaign. When they had carried out their reorganisation Saul had two thousand men and Jonathan about a thousand, all the others had been dismissed back to their homes. Jonathan tried out his men with an expedition to Geba, where a Philistine garrison still held out; they captured the town with little difficulty and returned to Gibeah. Saul was about to carry out a similar practice expedition when he learnt of the Philistine advance. He then retreated with his men back to Gilgal to pick up the eastern levies of Benjamin, knowing that the presence of Jonathan at Gibeah would deter the Philistines from turning south, or pushing any further on immediately.

Saul arrived at Gilgal and began to reorganise the men he found there, meaning to set out within two or three days. But he received a message from Samuel saying that he was to wait there until Samuel arrived, which he would do within seven days. Saul was somewhat puzzled and angered by this message, for, he had assumed, his being made King meant that he was now to take the leading part in the war. But he waited nonetheless, albeit anxiously. News came that the Philistine army was still encamped at Michmash and that, because such a large army was in danger of outrunning its supplies, three separate columns were sent out north, east and south-west and these spread over the land, pillaging and burning. But the people had had warning of the Philistines' approach and had previously hidden food in the hills and hid there themselves on the enemy's appearance. Although the enemy did much damage, they were without reliable intelligence and did not know where the people were, so that many small detachments of Philistines were attacked at night, or ambushed.



Saul, meanwhile, waited until the seventh day, and then, impatient to be going, performed a sacrifice and gave the order to break camp and march west. Just at that moment Samuel appeared, and when he learnt that Saul had already offered a sacrifice and given the order to depart, he flew into a rage and cursed Saul, telling him that because of these actions El had withdrawn his favour from him and that his kingdom would not be passed on in his family, but that another would be anointed king in place of him, and many other harsh and angry words. Saul was astonished, but the exigencies of the war gave him no leisure to stop and expostulate with the priest. He marched off with his army and reached Gibeah in the evening of the next day.

Here he rejoined his son and their two forces united and advanced to Geba. There their forces and those of the Philistines encamped at Michmash, a mile north, faced each other for several days. Saul was loath to make a frontal assault on such a large and well-entrenched force, the Philistines for their part were waiting for Saul's forces to desert him. After a while, however, their supplies began to run low, their foraging parties had not secured much food and several hundred of the men of these parties had fallen victim to surprise attacks and ambushes. A portion of the Philistines began an advance due south through the Pass of Michmash, hoping to swing round and take Saul's forces in the rear. But as they passed through the narrowest part of the defile they were ambushed by Jonathan's forces, Jonathan taking the foremost position in the attack, and beaten back in confusion. Saul, on hearing of Jonathan's success attacked direct down the Geba to Michmash road and pressed the Philistines hard back to their camp. The two streams of wounded and fleeing soldiers entering the camp produced such a panic that the rest of the Philistine forces broke and fled. Saul's army pursued the Philistines for two days along the road back to the coast, and all the people of the land who had been hiding in the hills came down to join in the pursuit. The Philistines were deep in hostile territory and any of their soldiers who were separated from the rest were hunted down and killed without mercy. A few regiments of Philistines managed to keep discipline and return more or less intact, but the Philistines had lost over eight thousand men and it was the worst defeat they had ever suffered in the land.

Saul was now pre-eminent in the land, as it was obvious that the Philistines were in no position to launch any more large expeditions for some time, moreover all their garrisons in the hill-country had been driven out and their allies shamed. The people of the land hastened to render homage to Saul, but Saul, although king in name, was not a king in the sense that a king is King in Babylonia, that is absolutely. His position was that he was King over Benjamin and Ephraim, but as to the rest of the land, he enjoyed no special authority. He could, for example, levy troops, but not taxation. If he attempted to enforce his will by force then he had to consider whether his objective was worth the ill-will that this enforcement

would generate. And there were many, even in Benjamin, remembering how recently Saul was simply one of the people, and forgetting the recent danger of the Philistines, who grudged him his office. And then there was the question of Samuel's attitude; after his outburst at Gilgal Samuel had gone back to Ramah and shut himself up in his house, hardly even appearing to perform his priestly duties. No one, least of all Saul, could understand his actions, but there were many in the land who used the silence of Samuel to strengthen their case against Saul.

However, there was not long to wait until Samuel again demonstrated his hostility to his former protégé. The Amalekites in the far south, beyond Beersheba, had been harassing Judah, and the elders of Judah asked Saul to lead an army to attack them. Saul willingly agreed, because he saw that this would be a useful opportunity to bolster his authority in Judah, which up to then had been purely nominal. To his surprise on his setting out Samuel appeared and blessed him, asking him to dedicate the spoils of his victory to El. Saul agreed and left, not realising that Samuel had set a trap for him, for in Benjamin the custom is to make a sacrifice and a dedication at the shrine of El equivalent in value to a fifth of the spoils of war. However Samuel was referring to a cruel and archaic custom of Ephraim, whereby in a war against a particularly bitter enemy it might be agreed to destroy everything belonging to that enemy, men, women, children, animals, crops and call that a dedication. Thus when Saul defeated Agag, king of the Amalekites, despite the fact that he sent lavish offerings to every shrine in the land, Saul was still able to denounce him as impious, and not a man of his word. When Saul eventually returned and confronted Samuel, the latter repeated his threats and denunciations, laying most emphasis on the fact that Saul had let Agag go with a lenient peace-treaty, instead of sacrificing him. Saul, who was not a cruel man, was outraged at this monstrous suggestion, which he might have agreed with if Agag had been one of the lords of Philistines, instead of an unimportant nomad. He grew so incensed that he laid hands on Samuel and in the scuffle Samuel's cloak was torn—Saul is the only man who ever raised a hand against Samuel. But the priest freed himself and stormed out with all his majesty unimpaired and returned to Ramah. He never spoke out against Saul in public again, though on occasions in private he would speak against him and on one such occasion his words were followed by an omen, the next night a violent storm arose and much rain fell—this was at harvest time, a very rare occurrence with us, and one that caused much talk. But Samuel never saw Saul again.

It puzzled people at the time, and it still puzzles people who still care about the happenings of the past, why Samuel so quickly turned against the man he had anointed. There are three explanations which are current. The first is that Samuel was jealous of Saul and angry that he had been forced by the people to anoint a king over them. But Samuel could

hardly have been jealous since he was old and in no condition to lead the people against the Philistines as he had in his youth, nor were his sons of the mettle to provide leadership. Nor could he have been angry that the people forced him to anoint a king, since, unless he believed that the people were sinful, he could not have resisted their call for a king, and as he did not accuse them of sin, merely warning them of the dangers of monarchy, then clearly he did not think that they were sinful. Nor has anyone ever argued that El is opposed to kings *per se*, only to sinful ones. Nor is it true that the people of the land had never had kings because they were forbidden them, as some argue. It is merely that they had never needed them before.

The second explanation for Samuel's opposition to Saul is that it sprang from Samuel's anger at Saul's usurpation of the priestly role at Gilgal and his disobedience in the matter of Agag and the Amalekites. But nothing that Samuel said at the time of Saul's anointing indicated that the priest was to have a controlling influence over him during his reign. Nor was Saul in the wrong to offer sacrifices and order a march when Samuel had told him he would be there to perform the sacrifice on the seventh day. Indeed Saul was rather in the wrong in waiting for so long, when the military situation was so pressing. And with us anyone can offer a sacrifice, though great sacrifices cannot be undertaken by young people in the presence of their elders, or by anyone of an undistinguished family in the presence of a more distinguished person—apart from these instances the rule is that anyone may make a sacrifice as long as it is according to due form, and as long as as soon as possible after the sacrifice an equivalent dedication is offered at the nearest shrine. And, furthermore, we might say, if it is not proper for a king to offer a sacrifice it is difficult to think who might be able to sacrifice with more propriety. In this instance there is more than a suspicion that Samuel was deliberately seeking an opportunity to discredit Saul in public, as is certainly the case with the matter of Agag and the Amalekites. In this instance it is impossible to think other than that this was Samuel's purpose.

The third explanation is that almost as soon as Samuel had anointed Saul he began to notice in him signs of the madness that afflicted him increasingly as his reign went on. But others say that it was grief at Samuel's alienation from him that caused Saul's madness in the first place. In any case Saul's madness was of the depressive kind, and it did not in any way affect his performance of his office, but on the contrary it came upon him only in moments when he was not active and disappeared the moment that some emergency or situation where action was necessary ensued.

None of these explanations will do, it seems to me, for the reasons I have given above, and I must now offer my own, though I should say that this is not only my explanation, but one which, when I told him King David agreed with, saying that my

suspicions were similar to his own. And it is this: Samuel was hurried by the pressure of events into choosing Saul for a king. However, although Saul had the loyalty of Benjamin and Ephraim and the allegiance of most of the north, he had no real connection with Judah. Now Judah, as I have said, was much better protected from the Philistines by the nature of the land than was any part of the north, and consequently was more peaceful and prosperous. Indeed when Benjamin and the north were suffering under the yoke of the Philistines, Judah had hardly been affected at all. What probably occurred to Samuel with hindsight is that to choose a king from the north, no matter how good a general and a statesman he might be, was to ensure that that king would never have real command of Judah, and consequently never have a strong power-base in the land, since the north is so much more disunited and disparate. On the other hand if Samuel could have found someone from Judah, who also had strong ties with the north, then that person could be a much more effective king and one likely to establish a lasting kingdom. I am almost sure that this is what went through Samuel's mind in the early days of Saul's reign, and what caused his bitter outbursts against Saul. For after some years of brooding over his mistake, and shortly before his death, he took David and secretly anointed him Saul's successor.

It happened in this way. Samuel had decided to appoint a successor to Saul, one who had the right connections with both Judah and the north, as I said before. He considered carefully who might be a suitable candidate, and his choice fell on one of the sons of Jesse, a man of Bethlehem, near Jerusalem. It is said that Samuel's own family had originated in Bethlehem, and had only later moved to Ephraim, so it may have been that they were relatives. On the other hand my readers must not find it remarkable that someone like Samuel should know of someone who lived in a far place and was not his relative. For Samuel was old and one of the great subjects of conversation amongst the people of the land is who is related to who, who lives where, and who the notable people of each district are; Samuel would have heard such conversation all his life and probably could have dictated as accurate a census of the land as any that have been compiled since under the monarchy.

Jesse, Samuel knew, was a Judite, but one whose family had lived for several generations on the borders of Benjamin and had many connections with that tribe. There were also connections with other groups in the north, and with Moab. Moreover Jesse was known to have several fine sons, men in the prime of life. Knowing that Saul had spies watching him, Samuel sought a pretext for a visit to Bethlehem and soon found it in the famous Ingathering celebrations that took place in that town each year. These were not essentially different from those held anywhere else, but differed only in their scale and in their exuberance. David, when he became king, never missed attending these festivities. Samuel took an ox and set off to offer it as a sacrifice and, as he was notable figure, naturally

Jesse, the chief man of the town, invited him to stay at his house. There Samuel took a good look at the sons of Jesse, Eliab, Abinadab and Shammah, all strong and handsome young men, but something told him that none of these were destined to be King. He asked Jesse whether he had no more sons and Jesse replied that he had one more son, who was, however, minding the flocks. Samuel asked for him to be fetched, and while he was being sent for Jesse explained that David, the last son, was the son of an Edomite concubine.

Now I must explain that with us there are two kinds of marriage. There is marriage proper, where the bride's family provide a dowry, but the bridegroom must also pay them a bride-price. This type of marriage is considered more usual than the other sort and divorce, though possible, is difficult and expensive. Also if a man has only one wife, and certainly when he marries for the first time, it is in this way. But a man with us may have as many wives as he can afford to keep, or as he thinks can dwell peaceably in the one house and most men who have a second or third wife marry her by another custom, which is called concubinage. This is where a legal contract is drawn up between the man and the woman, in which each is acting as a person in their own right and they each bring to the marriage only as much wealth as either owns in their own right. Moreover the contract often explicitly states that the woman is to have such and such rights and to continue to manage her own possessions. This kind of marriage lasts only so long as either party desire it and can be dissolved very easily. Although women of distinguished families always prefer to marry by the first custom, women who live as concubines are not despised, but are just as much married as traditional wives. This second kind of marriage is often favoured by women who have no close relatives or who come from foreign countries, and so it was with David's mother, the Edomite woman, Nahaz.

Children of these marriages are just as legitimate too, nor does our law discriminate against them, but naturally the children of one father by different mothers are often at odds with each other over who will inherit what. And so it was that the three sons of Jesse's first wife were jealous of David, because he was the youngest and, so they thought, his father's favourite. His father had, to avoid ill-will, made David the chief shepherd of his flocks, which were considerable, and he spent most of the time away from town, by the sheepfolds, or in summer at some remote sheiling or other in the hills. When he arrived suddenly Samuel knew that here was the future King; David was tall, though not as tall as Saul, handsome, with a tanned complexion from his outdoor life and deep black hair. He was about twenty years old. As soon as he could get him on his own Samuel explained to David that El had chosen him to succeed Saul, but that he must bide his time, and wait until Saul's death to claim his kingdom; and with that he anointed him and returned abruptly to Ramah.

No one was more astonished at this turn of events than David, who up to then had had no prospect other than being a chief shepherd and animal dealer, albeit a prosperous one. And who can fathom the mystery of who is called and who is not? I have seen all three of David's brothers and they were all probably as capable as him. What could have swayed Samuel to choose David over his brothers? It was not just that David enjoyed connections with Edom through his mother that they did not. For these were never of *great* use to him. A friend of mine, a priest and a very wise man, whom I once spoke to on this head said that what someone in Samuel's position would look for is a hint of certain kind of ambition. For, he said, if you were to tell some men that they were to be King they would simply sit back and wait to be acclaimed, which of course would never happen. You would need, he continued, to find someone who, on being told this, would begin actively to organise his destiny. And David was certainly someone like this. On the other hand David himself once said, in characteristic self-deprecation, that Samuel could have chosen any one of two hundred men in Judah who could have done as much, and perhaps more, than he did. Who shall say?

Saul, however, was at this time still King and his reign had been a very successful one from the first. Almost as soon as he had achieved his great victory over the Philistines the neighbouring lands to the east began to grow hostile. These countries had never been formal allies of the Philistines, but it suited them to have a weak and divided land which they could plunder at their will. Now it seemed that the land was set to become as established a state as their own, and the kings of these countries decided severally to try to depose Saul, so that they could continue to waste the land in traditional fashion. No sooner had Saul returned from chastising the Amalekites, than he heard that the King of Ammon was mustering soldiers. He mounted a pre-emptive strike against Ammon, which astonished the Ammonites with its speed and efficiency. In the next few years Saul had to campaign in turn against the King of Zobah in Aram, against Moab and against Edom. In each case he preferred simply to check the aggression of the foreign king, to secure tribute and to sign a peace-treaty. He wanted recognition, rather than conquest. During these years the Philistines, still smarting from their defeat at Michmash, were quiescent.

Saul's hand was light on the land and the people, forgetting Samuel's discontent, learned to love him. He acted more like a judge than a king, for his court was small and located at his home-town of Gibeah and maintained almost wholly from his personal estates. He levied no taxation, as his only expense beyond the court was a small standing army, made up of the core of the army which had defeated the Philistines at Michmash, to which he added from time to time any likely men, or experienced mercenaries who offered their services to him; and this army was maintained from the tribute that he won from the surrounding

nations. He did not meddle in local affairs but let the judges and the priests and elders continue to regulate things as they had always done. If Saul was loved, his handsome son Jonathan was even more loved, and it seemed that his reign was indeed a blessed time after the oppressions that the land had suffered for so many generations.

## V

### David and Saul

There were two things, however, which continued to threaten the peace of the land. The first was the illness of Saul, his depressive madness which came on him now and then, unexpectedly, but usually when there was no press of events or action that needed to be taken. During these bouts of melancholy, when time weighed heavily on him and nothing could shake his gloom, he was often suspicious and would be violent or threaten violence to his household and even his family. The other concern was the Philistines, who continued to plan military action against the land. The fact that the small-scale and desultory warfare, which had continued for three generations between them and the people of the land, suddenly ceased on all fronts one summer only added to the sense of foreboding.

It was Saul's madness that allowed David his first entry into Saul's entourage. Samuel had been seeking for a way to introduce David into Saul's circle so that we could gain the contacts and influence that would allow him in time to supplant Saul's family. Although Samuel and Saul were estranged Samuel still had many secret supporters in Saul's household and word was passed to them that David should be recommended whenever an opportunity occurred. Soon Saul's physician declared that music was the way to soothe the king's troubled spirit (whether the doctor was one of Samuel's sympathisers or his announcement was just fortuitous, I do not know). However one of Samuel's men at court reported that David the son of Jesse was the man who could best help Saul, as besides his other accomplishments he was skilled lyre-player.

Now with us there are various kinds of music. There is the music of religious shrines, usually sung by a trained choir, accompanied by instruments. There is the raucous town-music of bagpipes, drums and flutes, which accompanies popular festivals. But the most esteemed music is that of a solo lyre-player, who usually sings as well. The repertoire for this kind of music consists of dances, which usually have no words, and songs, which are sometimes in praise of heroes and famous battles, sometimes about the beauty of a particular region, but which are mostly about the pains and pleasures of love. David had learnt the lyre and a large number of songs from a famous virtuoso of his home-town, who later declared that David was his most talented pupil and that had he had as much time to practice as he grew older, as he had had in his youth, he might have been as renowned a lyre-player as he was a king! David was brought to court and played for Saul. Saul, whose tribe of Benjamin has traditionally not been a very musical one, was immediately ravished, and David, by his



charm, his good looks and good manners grew in favour at court. When Saul's madness came on him David was very quick to guess which kind of music would best cheer him, or when he should lay the lyre aside and divert the king with jokes and whimsies, or call for tumblers or magicians, or for Saul's hunting dogs, which he loved inordinately. Saul for his part loved David and made him his armour-bearer, for apart from his personal esteem for him it was also the case that David could advise him in his relations with the leading men of Judah.

A few months after David arrived at Saul's court the Philistines suddenly appeared with a massive army at Azekah, on the borders of Philistia and Judah. They threatened to advance up the valley to Socoh in Judah, and, if they succeeded in this, then the way would open for them to march into the heart of Judah. It seemed by this that the Philistines had changed their tactics yet again. For Azekah was only a day's march from Gath, and it seems that their idea was to push straight into Judah from their own heartland, thus avoiding the difficulties and the dangers of having to fight far from home.

The elders of Judah sent a desperate plea for Saul's help, and Saul set off at once with his ready reserve across country, sending out a general call to arms. He and his troops arrived just in time to dig themselves into the valley side just below Socoh, and when the Philistines arrived in the area the next day they were surprised to find an army already opposing them, and so dug themselves in on the other side of the valley.

After this there was a stalemate for several weeks as it was in the interests of neither side to force the issue. The Philistines for their part were surprised by the sudden appearance of Saul and the professional look of his army, a much more disciplined force than any they had been used to facing in the land. There was, on our side, even less willingness to go down into the valley and tackle such a large force. And so both sides stared at each other. Each morning a champion came down from the Philistine camp, a little after day-break, and taunted the people of the land. He was tall, perhaps even as tall as Saul, and dressed in the very latest design of armour and always he asked for a champion from our side to meet with him in personal combat. Both Saul and Jonathan were tempted to meet him, but both realised that the risk was too great, since if one of them met him and lost, not only would they be killed, but our forces, who were very much on the defensive, would probably flee in disarray, leaving the country wide open to the Philistines. So each morning the troops glumly sat in their ranks and endured the reproaches of the Philistine champion.

David, just before news of the Philistine attack broke, had begged leave from Saul to visit Bethlehem for an important sacrifice. When he arrived he took part in the ceremony, but stayed on for a couple of days to sort out a problem that had arisen with Jesse's flocks. While he was away at the sheep-folds, the call to arms arrived, and when he returned he learnt the

news and set out at once for Socoh, taking supplies, grain, bread and cheese, to his brothers, who had preceded him.

Arrived at camp David hastened to Saul, who greeted him affectionately and told him what the situation was. From there he sought out his brothers, who greeted him less affectionately. They were camped on top of the hills to the south of the valley and from their tent the whole panorama of the opposing army could be seen. David talked with his brothers, and was saying that he could see a place where the river could be crossed easily and above it a small re-entrant; it looked very much as if a small party could use this gully to ascend the opposing hills during the night and then circle round behind the Philistines. 'Why,' he asked, 'Has no one been sent to reconnoitre the other side of the valley?' His brothers, who had never liked him, and who had only grown more jealous of him with his appointment at Saul's court, had grown more and more impatient at David's words, and finally, at this last question said, as one voice, 'Why don't you go and do it?' and rose up and left him.

David ignored their rudeness and went to find their commander. He explained his idea to him and asked permission to go down himself that night and do the reconnaissance. The commander agreed, but pointed out that there was no moon that night. David then asked whether he couldn't go at first light, do the reconnaissance before anyone was stirring on the other side and lie up all day on the opposite slopes before returning at dusk. The commander demurred and wanted to ask Saul's permission, but David knew that Saul would never let him carry out so risky a mission. Eventually the commander yielded and David went off to prepare.

An hour or two before dawn David rose and dressed himself in dark clothes, covering them with a very old and very dirty cloak he had borrowed. He took a few supplies for the day, and a short sword, but he wore no armour, trusting to concealment, or, if discovered, to speed and agility to escape the enemy. And indeed, thanks to his youth spent in the hills he was as swift and sure-footed as an antelope. He slipped down the hillside and had soon crossed the river, avoiding the sentries he knew were posted there. Unluckily for him he was nearly surprised by a sentry he had not expected and had to dive into an old dried steam-bed. The sentry, after looking around for a few minutes, concluded that the noise was an animal, and continued his rounds.

David had lost vital time and he knew that it was now impossible to investigate the hillside and the small valley that morning, so he decided to creep down the main valley instead, keeping below the banks of the stream-bed, and trying to spy out the dispositions of the enemy's front rank. It hardly needs saying that, if his first mission was hazardous, his second plan was doubly so, but David was a man who knew no fear. He crept along the stream-bed, peering over the bank at intervals, and after some time had travelled about a mile.

At this point the stream course turned left, towards the river and suddenly the right-hand bank dipped and David walked straight into the open. He looked and saw an open, sandy area and, beyond that, about fifty feet away, a little knoll. Unfortunately, this was the very spot that the Philistine champion chose to taunt the people of the land from each morning, and he had just assumed his position and was just opening his mouth to shout, when he spotted David in front of him.

Most men would have turned tail and run back up the stream-bed. And probably David might have escaped, as he was a very swift runner, and the Philistine was in full armour. But then again Philistines warriors are very skilled with spears, and part of their training consists of flinging two spears to hit a small target a hundred feet away in the space of five heart-beats. It is likely that if David had fled, he would have been speared through the back before he took five paces. Instead he held his ground, and the Philistine, guessing by his dress and appearance that he was a spy, advanced on him with a roar. David, for his part, reached behind his back and pulled down the leather sling he carried tucked in his belt. This was the weapon he carried about him in the hills when he was a shepherd, to scare away lions, and bears and wolves, from the flocks. Then, without showing his hands outside his cloak, he loaded into it a smooth pebble from his pouch. He then flung back his cloak and whirled the sling around his head. The Philistine probably never registered what David was doing, but advanced with drawn sword; he put his hand up to push his helmet, which was sitting on the back of his head, down over his face, but the pebble from David's sling hit his forehead the moment before with terrific force and he fell backwards. David strode forward, in one movement plucking the Philistine's sword from his hand and hacking into his neck, for his helmet had been knocked off by the force of the impact. Two strokes were enough to cut through the champion's neck and David seized the head by the hair and turned and raced towards the river. Hardly anyone on the Philistine side had seen what happened as, when their champion strode down from the mound he disappeared from their view, and David reached the river, waded across and reached friendly lines before the cry was raised in the camp.

On the other hand several sentries from our side had seen the fight and even before David had reached them, had begun to dance and triumph. Someone took the head and stuck it on a spear and marched up and down the river-bank taunting the Philistines. Some say that David immediately ordered an advance and that those of our army lowest on the slopes advanced first and the rest caught up later. Another version is that Saul, sitting outside his tent with Abner, his nephew, and his principal general, saw a commotion, and as soon as he learnt the cause of it ordered a general advance.

The Philistines for their part were dumb and helpless in the face of this disaster, they rose up to meet the people of the land, but their resistance was half-hearted, they quickly gave way and panic turned to flight. The people of the land pursued the Philistines down the valley all that day and by nightfall had taken Azekah and pushed deep into Philistia. This was almost as great a calamity for the Philistines as the defeat and pursuit from Michmash had been.

Saul gained enormous prestige by this second victory over a large Philistine army. But the real hero was David and when everyone had returned to Gibeah, Saul lavished honours and presents on David, and even offered to marry him to his daughter Merab. David modestly declined this last honour as he said that he came from too humble a background to aspire to marry the King's daughter. Unfortunately for David Saul's illness was of a paranoiac kind, that is, when he was afflicted he gave way to jealousy and suspicious fears, and often it was the people closest to him who excited the most jealousy in him. One incident that particularly preyed on his mind is what had happened when his army had entered Socoh on the way home, and a choir of women and unmarried women from the local shrine had greeted them with a traditional song of thanksgiving for victory. In this song they had sung the couplet:

Saul has slain thousands  
And David ten thousands.

Which seemed to him to slight his reputation. 'They have ascribed to me thousands of the enemy slain, but to David, tens of thousands. What else is there for him to have but the Kingdom?', he thought.

Now this song was not really as slighting as Saul had thought, for often in our songs there is found a poetic device called parallelism, whereby two statements go together to make one, or one is the metaphorical expression of the other, as, for example, we might say:

El has marshalled his storm-clouds,  
The Almighty has arrayed his chariots.

Which does not mean that there are two gods, one of whom operates in the sky, and the other on earth, but that we are describing the storm-clouds by metaphor as chariots, and that the repetition adds to the effect of the whole. This device originated in the fact most of our songs were sung by antiphonal choirs, which, by this device, could answer each other, though it is also now found in solo song. In the case of the thanksgiving-song it is easy to see that this is the case because it did not say, 'Saul has slain thousands, *but* David...', but 'Saul has slain thousands, *and* David...'. For in the period before kings an army would often have had several generals and the names of them would have been inserted in this verse in order of

merit, not of seniority. But perhaps the choir-master who adapted the traditional song could have been a little more tactful and inserted the names of Saul and David the other way round.

But it is often concrete incidents like this which lodge and fester in the minds of those afflicted by mental illness. Saul, who was sane most of the time, remember, knew very well the nature of his paranoia, and decided that it would be best if David were given a military command which kept him away from court, and out of his thoughts, for much of the time.

David gladly accepted the command and set about training and equipping a small force of men to raid the western borders of Philistia adjacent to Judah. At this time, that is, after the victory of Michmash, and more so after that of Socoh, Saul and his military advisers had conceived of a strategy to push the Philistines away from the borders of the land, to retake the areas of the coastal plain that they had taken over in the last generation or so, west of Ephraim, and to retake some of the foothills of the Judaeen hills in the south, which had been in Philistine hands for two or three generations. But this strategy had met with little success for, although the Philistines had been beaten twice in the hills, they were invincible down on the plains, where their heavily-armoured infantry, operating in close-packed and well-disciplined ranks, and backed by their fearsome chariot squadrons, would quickly envelop and massacre any of our forces they met. Moreover, although Saul's forces had managed to expel the Philistine garrisons from Ephraim in the early days of his revolt, this was because the garrisons were taken by surprise and because they were in alien cities, whose population hated them. The Philistines' own cities were impregnable. And Saul and Abner, his general, had already seen several expeditions of theirs cut to pieces by the Philistines.

David decided that a different strategy was needed. First he sent out spies into the foothill country to gather a complete and accurate picture of who owned what, where the garrisons were and in what strength they were, and where there were well-filled granaries. He then brought together a force of lightly-armed raiders. All the men were to be young and very fit, and preferably from the western parts of Judah, so that knew the country well. David trained them by having them play at combat with wooden swords and blunt-tipped spears, and by having them run up and down stony hillsides for hours. Much later than this time I myself saw some recruits going through some of these training techniques, and for someone like me, plump and sedentary, it was an awesome experience to see men run up and down almost perpendicular slopes, as fast as if they had been running on the level.

These men were equipped with short swords, spears, slings and light shields made of strips of wood pasted on top of each other, the grain of each layer at right angles to the grain of the previous layer. Believe it or not, this type of shield is just as resistant to a spear or sword-point, and only a fifth of the weight, of a leather or bronze shield. David also trained

them to travel across country very quickly, taking only light rations, as they were mainly to live off the country. And when their training was finished David led them into the border country to begin the war.

His idea was for an economic war; he had discovered from his spies that most of the inhabitants of the foothills region were still the descendants of the people of the land whom the Philistines had overrun. The Philistines, never a numerous people, had confiscated the best lands and forced the inhabitants to work these, but the poorer land they left to the people. David's strategy was to lead raiding parties to attack these Philistine estates, kill the owners and steal their goods and produce, or destroy their crops. He was careful to leave the land owned by Hebrews alone, thus making sure he did not alienate them. After a while the Philistines developed a squadron of light-chariots to pursue the raiders, but all that happened then was that when they knew themselves pursued David's men would simply destroy the spoils they had taken, abandon the stolen ass-carts in which they were transporting the spoils back to Judah, and take off across rough country, or up into the hills, where chariots could not pursue them. If they were pursued on foot, they would lure the Philistines on, then turn and attack them in a remote spot, from which few escaped. David mounted missions like this every few weeks, at all times of the year, and soon the foothills region was a ablaze from end to end.

The Philistines were nonplussed; this region was the richest region of Philistia and the source of most of their revenue. All they could do was increase taxes on the peasants, which alienated them even more from their overlords, and meant that tax-gathers and big land-owners were hardly safe from attack by the peasants anywhere in the region. Within a year or two the Philistines were so impoverished by David's tactics that they ceased to plan large-scale expeditions against Saul, or even to engage in small-scale warfare. Not only did David's tactics make the Philistines poorer, but almost every expedition returned with produce, or precious metals, or useful artefacts to swell Saul's royal coffers.

Unfortunately, although David's military successes made him the darling of the nation, and meant that Saul could hardly refrain from giving him more honours and more responsibilities, it also meant that Saul grew more and more jealous of him. And this was all for no reason, since David's intentions were never to take the glory of his exploits on himself, or to seek to supplant Saul in his own lifetime, and no-one except David and Samuel and a few of Samuel's closest confidants knew that David had been anointed Saul's successor. Because of his military duties David was absent from court for many months on end, and during this time some of Saul's entourage, those who hated him, either because of his successes, or because of the fact that he was a Judite, took care to whisper and insinuate all sorts of lies about David to the King. Principal amongst these was Abner, Saul's nephew, and

chief general, who was jealous of David's success, though not above copying his tactics in the north. Saul's jealousy of David needed no encouraging and it is probable that he would have broken with David much earlier were it not for the fact that David had two powerful advocates in his court. The first was Michal, Saul's daughter, whom David had asked in marriage soon after his military successes began. He had caught Saul in a good mood and made his request, his successes emboldened him, and besides, he and Michal were in love, whereas David had hardly even seen Merab when Saul offered her to him. The other advocate was Jonathan, Saul's eldest son, who was extraordinarily fond of David and had been his patron and friend from the moment he arrived in court. Indeed the two men had gone in front of a priest and taken oaths of blood-brotherhood together, so great was their attachment.

With his own madness getting gradually worse and being continually persuaded one way or another by rival advocates, it is little wonder that Saul became obsessed with David to the exclusion of all else. And one day, as often happens, the tense situation suddenly broke out in violence. David had returned from duty and was feasted at the court, though Saul sat in morose silence the whole time everyone else was praising David and listening to his, as always, modest and matter-of-fact narrative of the latest developments. Someone suggested that David should take up his lyre and sing again, as he used to. David picked up the lyre and strummed a few chords, but Saul suddenly snatched a spear from the wall and flung it at him. Saul's aim was good, but David, like many great warriors, seemed to have a sixth sense, and he jumped out of the way, seemingly even before he had seen the spear. There was a brief moment of shocked surprise when everybody stared at one another, with the spear clattering on the ground, before David ran out and before Saul started shouting to have his men arrest David.

David fled to his quarters and Jonathan ran after him. David snatched up a cloak and a sword and was leaving the palace when Jonathan caught up with him. Breathlessly the King's son told David that he would try to sound his father about David the next day and learn of his intentions. David was to go to a shepherd's hut they had seen one day nearby in the hills and the next day Jonathan would come by in the afternoon, ostensibly to practice his archery. He would come with a page-boy and if, on shooting, he directed the page to gather the arrows to his right, then all was well, but if to his left, then his father was implacable and David would have to flee. David thanked him, they embraced, and parted. Meanwhile Saul had had the greatest difficulty in persuading his men to obey his command to pursue David. For when a previously sane man begins to give insane directions to his servants it often takes them a little time to catch up. Saul was raving and foaming and beating those around him with the butt of the spear when Jonathan returned to say that David had been reported

escaping from the palace. Saul was given a sedative by his physician, and put to bed and all his court went about glumly, for those who loved David were sorrowful that he had had to flee, and those that hated him knew that as he had escaped and was now an enemy of Saul, then Saul could have no more clever and resourceful an enemy.

The next day Jonathan sounded his father. Saul was weak and bedridden, but his madness had not, as it had on previous occasions, left him, instead it had become focussed on David and engendered in him a steady determination to hunt him down. Jonathan grieved much at this, but set out in the afternoon for the hills. At the prearranged spot Jonathan shot his arrows and directed the page to his left to pick them up. He was turning to go when he saw David waving at him from the bushes; he told his page to hurry on ahead and turned to meet David. Both men were in tears as they embraced and as Jonathan told David of his father's determination. Jonathan urged David to flee that day, but David was determined, whatever the risk, to sneak back into the palace that night and see Michal. Jonathan tried to dissuade him, but in the end agreed to tell his sister to expect David that night. After this they parted.

That night David climbed over the wall of the palace, which, by-the-by, was not a great palace as one might find in Egypt, but Saul's father's house, together with the six or seven contiguous houses in the neighbour, which Saul had bought and had knocked together into one rambling series of courtyards, gardens and apartments. David slipped through two or three courtyards until he came to his own quarters, where he knocked and was admitted. But he was seen by a palace servant (for nothing can happen secretly in a palace) who went to tell the King. This time a sober Saul laid his plans carefully, the palace was to be surrounded and David's apartments were to be secured. But a maid of Michal's overheard the planning and raced to tell her mistress. She and David thought, and then told the maid to go back to Saul and report that David was asleep in his chamber. This would make Saul feel more confident and give David more time to get away. David bid Michal farewell and climbed out of the window, ran across the garden, climbed the wall and was away again.

When Saul and his men burst into the apartments a little while later they found David gone. Saul furiously demanded of his daughter and the maid why they had deceived him and Michal, to pacify him, told him that David had threatened to kill them both, unless they reported that he was asleep and helped him escape. This exonerated them, but unfortunately gave Saul one more article of indictment against David.

David made his way quickly to Ramah to report on what had happened to Samuel, who gave him refuge in his house for the night and then sent him on his way the next morning. However Samuel cleverly pretended that David was still at his house and soon Saul got to hear of it. He sent messengers to Samuel to demand that he hand David over to him,



but Samuel sent them away empty-handed. When they returned to him Saul bitterly reviled them and asked whether Samuel hadn't turned them into ecstatic prophets, they were talking so much nonsense. Someone suggested that Saul could go himself and demand the fugitive from Samuel, but he remarked, 'No, Samuel would have me prophesying as well.' In fact he was a little afraid of the old man and there was literally nothing he could do to make Samuel hand David over immediately. What he did do was send a detachment of troops to surround the town and cut off supplies. But Samuel, knowing that David had had nearly two days to make his escape and that news of his movements elsewhere would soon reach the King, threw open his house to a search party, which failed to find David, and had started to search the whole town, house by house, before the news that David had escaped reached them.

Shortly after this Samuel died. It is not thought that Saul murdered him, for Saul was direct in his dealing with everyone, even David. It is also said that he died happy, as he had helped David escape, and as El had spoken to him and told him that in time David would be King. He was ninety years old when he died, and he been a priest and a judge all his life and the people revered him. He was buried in Ramah.

David, meanwhile, had travelled south to Nob, and met with a party of his troops, whom he had told what had happened and who had agreed to accompany him into exile. They arrived at Nob and visited the shrine, where the priest Ahimelech, greeted them. David told him that he was on urgent business for the King and demanded provisions. But the priest guessed from his haste and the state of his clothes that something was wrong and tried to pretend that there was no food to be had. David then demanded the sacred bread from the altar, and the priest tried to deny this to David too, saying that as it was sacred bread he could not give it to David and his men as they might be ritually impure. Now as it happened David's men had been setting out on an expedition just as David met them and so, following our custom, they had abstained from sex for a period before, and David had not slept with Michal in his last visit to court, so all of them *were* pure and they laid hands on the bread and took it.

Just as David was leaving he remembered that Ahimelech had visited him after the battle of Socoh and begged from him the Philistine champion's sword as a trophy to increase the importance of the shrine, which he had granted him. So David demanded the sword back, and took it away, thinking it a lucky omen. Ahimelech was glad to see the back of David and his men, but a servant of Saul's, Doeg the Edomite, had seen what went on and hastened away that night to tell the King.

Meanwhile David and his men reached their home country.

## VI

### David the Fugitive

When Doeg arrived hot-foot at Gibeah he found Saul stamping and raving outside the town under a tamarisk tree. It appeared that they had tried to take the King hunting to divert his mind, but that suddenly he had remembered David again and begun dashing his spear to the ground and berating his servants, accusing them of being on David's side, accusing his absent son of inciting David to ambush him, and making other wild charges. His servants, for their part, were standing around in a bored, but apprehensive, way. Doeg came up to the King and, catching some of the his speech to the effect that no one would tell him where David was, boldly spoke:

'I saw David at Nob,' he said, 'He visited Ahimelech the Priest and he gave him provisions and the sword of the Philistine champion.'

Saul returned to the palace immediately and ordered servants to go and fetch the entire priestly establishment of Nob to him, Ahimelech, his sons and servants. The remainder of the day he spent fretting and fuming and uttering threats. When, the next day, Ahimelech and rest arrived Saul asked them why they had given supplies to David, who had sought to kill him (for by now this is what he truly believed). Ahimelech knew it would be pointless to try to argue that he had tried to prevent David from getting provisions, so he pretended not to have heard of the news of David's flight from Gibeah, and said:

'But everyone thought that David was your most faithful servant.'

Saul turned to his bodyguard and, pointing to the group said, 'Kill them all.'

The captain of the bodyguard, desperately hoping that Saul would change his mind, asked:

'I beg your pardon, Sir?'

'Kill them,' Saul screamed.

The bodyguard, to their credit, didn't move a muscle and the captain just stared off into space, as though he was statue. Saul turned to Doeg:

'You are my only faithful servant, it seems. Take them away and kill them.'

Doeg ran out and gathered together four of five of his countrymen together, returned, bound Ahimelech and his men and took them to a sheepfold outside the town, where they murdered them all, sixteen people, including three boys.

When the news got out of what had happened the whole country was in mourning, for never in living memory had anyone done anything so monstrous to his own countrymen as Saul had done to Ahimelech and his followers. The priests of Gibeah went out in the

afternoon and retrieved the bodies to give them an honourable burial, and the whole town mourned. But Saul did worse than this: Doeg, who before had been one of the lowest of his court, was suddenly promoted to Captain of the Bodyguard, and the bodyguard and the captain who had refused to kill the priests were sent off to the most dangerous part of the Philistine frontier, where most of them were soon killed. Doeg and the rabble of hired men he gathered together were sent to Nob, where they pulled the whole town apart in the search for sympathisers of David and killed several people, and stole much property. From this time on Saul refused to speak to Jonathan and he took Michal, and, after announcing that she was divorced from David, married her to a supporter of his in the north, one Paltiel.

David, meanwhile, had gone straight from Nob to a place called the Cave of Adullam, which was in the Judaeen hills, a convenient distance from Bethlehem and Hebron for most of the Elders of Judah to travel there and meet him. And his family came too, as did almost all the units of his fighting force. The Elders of Judah conferred with him and said that they were quite prepared to have David as their King, and to break with Saul. When the news of the massacre of Ahimelech and his followers came, however, some were fearful and went back on what they had said, others, however, were more determined than ever to have David as King. But David realised that for him to become King in Judah was a very unwise course. For this would lead to a war between Judah and Saul, one which he could not be certain of winning. And in any case such a war would only benefit the Philistines, who were always looking for an opportunity to divide and rule the people of the land. Besides, he had promised Samuel that he would never seek the throne in Saul's lifetime.

Instead he told the Elders that he would be quite willing to become King when Saul died, as Jonathan, his heir, would undoubtedly be overjoyed to have David as a partner in the monarchy. But until that time he would either go into exile, or try to live as a border-guard in some of the territory he had been contesting with the Philistines. With that the Elders departed, and David also dismissed most of his soldiers, telling them to go back to their headquarters and to carry on the war against the Philistines under Abner. There had also gathered to him at the Cave all sorts of criminals and malcontents, who saw in David hope of preferment. But David made an ironic speech to them, telling them that at the moment he had no need of their particular talents, but that when he did he would be sure to call on them.

And so, taking only his family and a hundred or so soldiers, he travelled across Judah to the shores of the Salt Sea and crossed over into Moab, where he was well received by his family's relatives and by the King. The King wanted to employ David as his chief general, as news of David's exploits had spread all over the region in the previous few years. But David knew that if he took up this offer, it would only serve to involve Moab in war with Saul. So he got the King to swear that he would resist all Saul's requests to extradite his family, which

the King did, and, after a stay of a few months, he crossed with his men back to Judah and set up in a natural fortress south of En-gedi, on the shores of the Salt Sea.

Here David and his men waited for several months and Saul did not attack them because he was busy about other business and because the fortress was in the far south of Judah, in wild desert country and very difficult to approach. This, however, did not stop various other people from coming to find David. One of whom was Abiathar, a son of Ahimelech the priest, who had escaped being taken away from Nob by Doeg, because he was away at the time. He became David's priest, and in time he was the person who introduced me, Shammah the Scribe, to David's court at Hebron. There also came down to David many warriors who were dissatisfied with Abner, Saul's general, and his way of running military affairs, and who wanted to serve under such a famous commander as David. Many of those men afterwards became members of the band of his 'Thirty Chief Men'.

Then news came that the Philistines to the west of Judah were besieging the town of Keilah. David wanted to go and relieve it, though many of his men feared that Saul's sympathisers in Judah would betray them. But David did not want to see an important Judaeian town fall to the common enemy and undo much of his work of the previous few years. So he marched back across Judah and relieved the town. However in doing this he brought himself again to the notice of Saul, who sent messages to the town's elders, demanding that they arrest David. David, to save them from reprisals, moved again into central Judah, to the hills near the town of Ziph and lived there with his men.

But various of the men of Ziph sent secretly to Saul to tell him of David's whereabouts and Saul came and pursued David away from Ziph towards the Salt Sea. Just as Saul's forces were closing in, however, news arrived that the Philistines, hearing of Saul's absence, had again renewed their attack on Keilah and Saul broke off the pursuit to go and chase them away. The only consolation that David had was that a secret message arrived from Jonathan, who was now reconciled with his father. Indeed Saul had begun to regain much of his sanity, and to display some remorse for his actions—but he was still implacably opposed to David and still believed him his bitter enemy. Jonathan's message said that he had secretly conferred with Abner and with all the chief men of the land, who had agreed that if Saul's relapsed into madness again, or if he looked like capturing David, Jonathan was to depose him and rule in his stead, with David as King of Judah.

This, however, did not prevent two more farcical incidents. By the time that Saul returned to the pursuit from Keilah, David, feeling safer because of Jonathan's message, had dismissed most of his men and lived in the hills with only a small band, which made his movements much quicker, for all he ever wanted to do was to evade Saul, and be left alone. Twice in the pursuit Saul caught up with David, once David and his men were hiding at dusk

in a narrow defile and Saul's advance guard, led by the King in person, passed up the track through the valley. David's men were hiding in the rocks either side of the path and could easily have fallen on Saul's men and killed them and the King too, but David had ordered them not to. Just as they were passing the King ordered his men to go on ahead and he stayed behind to relieve himself. He squatted behind some rocks, less than five feet from where David was hidden and David leant forward and carefully cut a small corner off Saul's cloak. Saul, noticing nothing, stood up, and carried on up the path. Again a few days later the pursuit had taken the two groups back to towards Ziph and David and Abishai, one of his warriors, crept by night into Saul's camp and reached his tent, they entered the tent and stole the King's spear and his water-pitcher and crept out of the camp again. At dawn David sent a messenger with a flag of truce to Saul with the spear, the water-pitcher and the piece of cloak and told him to tell Saul that twice he had been at their mercy, but twice David had spared him and to ask him whether this was action of someone who sought the King's death? Saul was so abashed and humiliated at this message that he ordered his forces back to Gibeah at once.

David, however, was still in a quandary. Although Saul had, for the moment, left Judah, he realised that as soon as another bout of madness came on him he would return, and that although Jonathan had promised to depose his father David was so scrupulous that even this way out of his difficulties seemed to him not in keeping with his promise to Samuel. What he needed, he decided, was a secure base outside Saul's Kingdom, where he could bide his time and wait for the King's death, for David was not yet thirty years old and in the prime of life. It was then he conceived his boldest plan, but before he could put it into effect he needed supplies. He, therefore, called together some of the men he had dismissed before and marched to Carmel. Here he wanted to meet with Asa the Calebite, who was a very rich man, the richest in the area. But he was old and grown very curmudgeonly so that he was often called derisively Nabal, which means, 'Fool'. Asa was at Carmel to supervise the shearing of his flocks, and David wanted to discuss a loan with him. Now in his months as a fugitive in Judah David had been careful never to steal anything from anyone except from known supporters of Saul, and if he had taken anything from anyone else he had either paid for it, or left a written contract, promising to pay the value of the goods plus interest whenever he could. He had been careful never to touch the flocks of Asa, because he had always had him in mind as a source of supplies in an emergency.

However when David's messengers arrived at Carmel Asa greeted them with rudeness and said 'Why should I listen to the servants of a revolted servant? And why should I give him any supplies? Go away and tell your master that.' When David heard of this he gave way to anger for perhaps the first time in all his adventures, and immediately ordered

his men to arm, meaning to go down to Carmel and kill Asa and all his men and take their flocks and goods. But Abigail, Asa's young wife, had overheard her husband's rough answer and she, knowing what David would do, hurriedly ordered asses to take supplies to David. Over and above this she hurried off herself with the loaves, the wine-skins, the sheep, the parched grain, and the raisins and the figs she had ordered. When she met with David she fell at his feet and begged him not to kill her husband, whom, she said, was in his dotage and not to be taken seriously. David was impressed with the supplies and very taken with Abigail, who was young and beautiful, and promised to spare Asa. That night at dinner Asa got very drunk and boasted how he had seen off David, which the King had failed to do, for he had not heard of his wife's peace-making efforts. But the next morning when she told him what she had done he was struck dumb with astonishment and fury, and he suffered a stroke, and after lingering ten days, died. David, who had been waiting in the hills then immediately took over all Asa's property and married Abigail.

He then took his whole entourage, consisting by now of several thousand men, and flocks and supplies west, into the border country of Philistia, and then on into Philistia itself and, before the Philistines had had a chance to react, he and his men were encamped under the walls of Gath. Now this may seem to have been a foolhardy escapade but David knew that the Philistines, after more than five years of being harried in the north and south by David and Abner, were wasted by conflict and could no longer put large armies in the field quickly. Moreover David and his men, especially the men who had fled to him from Abner's army, had been discussing and practising tactics whereby a force of infantry could resist a force of chariots in open flat country, and David had taken care to equip his force with long pikes and various other pieces of military equipment for this purpose. Finally David knew that Achish, the Lord of Gath, was more reasonable than most Philistines, a fact perhaps attributable to his mixed parentage, for his mother was an Edomite. Indeed, to digress for a moment, if the people of the land had ever found that they could have negotiated with the Philistines, then naturally they would have done so and the Philistines might have become overlords of the whole land; but it was their steadfast refusal to negotiate with people they regarded as inferior to themselves that united the whole land against them.

Achish, when news was brought to him of the sudden appearance of David and his men outside the walls was almost pleased. For he had long thought how interesting it would be to meet his most determined enemy. But he also realised that David had not come to him as a suppliant, but that the forces encamped under his walls meant that David had taken the advantage over him. Also he guessed what David's plans were, so that, when the more superficial of his councillors began joking and triumphing at the fact that David had, as they saw it, placed themselves in his hands, he rebuked them, and when they replied that David

must be mad to come to Gath, and was probably raving with spittle running down his beard at this very moment, he retorted, 'As if I haven't got enough madmen here.' He sent a messenger to say that Achish swore the most solemn oaths by all the gods of his land to grant David absolute safe-passage into the city to meet him, and awaited David's arrival.

When the two men met, they immediately got on very well. It is interesting to note that David had the rare property of being able to charm and disarm almost everyone, male or female, from the moment of first meeting them, and there are many examples of this in his career. Here one reason for this was that David and Achish were able to converse in a common language, the language of Edom, and who knows what pleasure it gave them to speak the language of their mothers after so long. Another reason was that both men had a great interest in military strategy, and could talk in a very detached way about the campaigns that they themselves had organised and fought, even against each other. And Achish found that he had anticipated David's idea exactly, which was this: David proposed that Achish should give him control of the border zone between Philistia and Judah. In return for this David would pay tribute to Achish and fight against the nomads of the Negeb to the south, who included the Amalekites, whom we have already seen Saul fighting, and who were a nuisance both to Philistia and to Judah.

The advantage to David of this plan is that he would have a secure base outside Saul's kingdom, he would be able to prepare for his return to Judah, he would be able to gather supplies and wealth together to support his future kingdom, he would be able to bring the border-war between Judah and Philistia to a close and he would be able to control the nomads to the south. Achish, for his part, would gain tribute from the border-areas, for these areas had ceased to be wealth-yielding soon after David's campaigns had begun and it now cost him more to try to control them and attempt to collect taxes than he actually obtained. Moreover he would benefit from having a border-guard who could control the nomads. And besides, he liked David.

So the deal was struck and David and his army moved off to make their headquarters at the town of Ziklag, to the south of Gath. And here, within a few weeks, David had organised the whole of the border-area, so that peace could return to this much fought-over region. And David and his court, for by now we may use the term, since David was a king in all but name, stayed at Ziklag for several years. Within a few months the region had been so pacified that revenue could again be collected and David was scrupulous in paying tribute to Achish, though he had plenty of revenue left for himself. He controlled the nomads by sending forces to take over their water-holes in the desert, and without these the nomads could not maintain their herds, so they were forced to capitulate. David was also concerned to maintain his influence in Judah and the visits of the Elders of Judah to Ziklag became as

frequent as those they paid to Gibeah, so that it came about that David was in reality the most influential man in Judah. Saul and his court tacitly accepted this situation, who knows but that Saul himself regretted his animus against David, for certainly no one else in the north hated David, except perhaps Abner and those who were jealous of him, and those, like Doeg, who had risen to prominence at Saul's court because of the King's campaigns against David. It must be said, however, that Saul never spoke of any remorse to anyone, and no one was foolish enough to mention David by name at Gibeah.

However, despite the fact that David knew that the northern military establishment's affinity with him was based on nothing more than a common cause against the Philistines' aggression, he continued to send information about the Philistines' intentions and movements to Abner. He was not being disloyal to Achish in this, since Achish had told him that there was nothing he desired more than peace in the land and that he himself was not in favour of any more military action against Judah or the north, although in this he was constantly overruled by the four Lords of the remaining Philistine cities. And besides David was sending no information beyond the common gossip that reached Ziklag, but would not reach the north. Moreover when any officers from the north strayed, as many did, to Ziklag, for an unofficial meeting, David and his officers would discuss with them the techniques they had developed to counter chariot-warfare. And these were, briefly, that the infantry should form hollow squares three ranks deep, bristling with pikes, and in the centre archers, or javelin-throwers, or slingers, would take up their positions. And the squares would be doubly protected by, further out, a circle of caltrops (iron balls with four long spikes, constructed so that they would sit on three of the spikes wherever they were tossed, with the fourth spike sticking up to bring down the horses, or foul the chariot-wheels); and these would be hidden, if possible, in grass. Taking these ideas away with them, the officers of north began to plan their own campaigns in the lowlands of the north.

There is no reason why David should not have remained at Ziklag for many years and succeeded at last to the throne of Judah, when, in due course, Saul died. But within a short space of time events again outran expectations and David was installed as King sooner than he would have liked, and in circumstances he would have done anything to avoid if he could have.



## VII

### David, King in Judah

What happened was that the officers of the north decided to take the city of Beth-shean, which up to that time had been independent of Saul's rule and was allied to the Philistines. They sent an army and began to besiege it, for it had high and thick walls and was well-provisioned. The Governor of Beth-shean sent to the Philistines for help. When the message came the Lords of the Five Cities called a council and debated. Beth-shean was in the far north, north of Manasseh, and an area that the Philistines had never really controlled; to march so far north was to risk being ambushed at any point by Abner, and even if they succeeded in marching all that way and defeating the people of the north, and relieving the siege, what guarantee did they have that the people of the land would not just return and take the city the next year or the year after? This was how Achish argued, but his more bellicose colleagues could not bear the thought of leaving an ally at the mercy of Saul, so they agreed on a large expedition to the north. And with the Philistines it was customary for a view taken by a majority to become the view of all, regardless of prior disagreements. So Achish prepared to march north also.

Now there is an absurd story which still circulates, that David accompanied Achish north with an army to take part in this campaign. But firstly David would have broken with Achish rather than fought against Saul, and secondly the Philistines would never have trusted David to accompany them. Indeed a variant of this story has it that David went north with the intention of switching sides at any battle that might take place. But this is just as absurd, as David would have known that if the Philistines *had* trusted him to be part of their army they would still have made him fight in the vanguard, and there would therefore have been no opportunity for any defection.

The story of David's being present on the Philistine side in this campaign seems to have taken its origin from an official Philistine account of the war that listed all the units which took part in the campaign. As Achish took part, then units from all his lands were listed, and as David was his commander in Ziklag a detachment from there is listed as having taken to the field under his command, even though it never did. Those who have anything to do with the absurdities of official record-keeping will understand how this apparent mistake is entirely consistent with the procedures of bureaucracy.

In fact David was occupied to the south during the time that this campaign took place. Taking advantage of his temporary absence from Ziklag on a secret visit to Judah, a

group of nomads from the south boldly raided Ziklag and took much booty and several persons of David's household, though the troops guarding his headquarters managed to fight off the nomads successfully. When he returned David took six hundred men and set off rapidly in pursuit. By the end of the first day a third of his force were flagging and David left them behind to pursue even more quickly. The next day they found a young Egyptian, a servant of the nomads, abandoned for dead in the desert. When they had revived him he told them which way the nomads intended to flee, so that at dusk that day David caught up with them, taking them unawares at their campsite, and he killed them all, except a few who escaped on camels. Thus he recovered the stolen goods and the people who had been abducted and returned to Ziklag. It is an illustration of the fair-mindedness of David that he divided the spoils not amongst the four hundred men who had accompanied him on the second day, but amongst all the men who had set out with him from Ziklag.

Meanwhile in the north Philistines mustered at Aphek and marched north until they reached Shunem. Saul travelled with his army to Jezreel, across the valley from Shunem and Abner came with forces from Beth-shean. The plan was that the people of the north would advance towards the Philistines, keeping to the lower slopes of Mt Gilboa, and then once they had sighted the enemy they would descend to the plain where they would deploy in the new hollow squares and allow the Philistines to advance around them. When the Philistines had broken their strength against these squares the remainder of the army would sweep down the hillside and rout the Philistines. It was a good plan, but there were several problems with it. The first was that the troops were not used to the new tactics and not well-practised in them. The second is that Saul himself and three of his sons, Jonathan, Abinadab and Malchuisha, were present, besides Abner, so there was a confusion as to who was really in command. Thirdly Saul, who by now was an old man, had grown increasingly depressed and dispirited in the previous few months, and one of the symptoms of this was that he often refused to eat for days on end. The night before the battle he had travelled on horseback to consult with a medium, in fact Abner's mother, at Endor, to the north. Abner had suggested this as a way of relieving Saul's depression. But instead it had completely the opposite effect, as Saul came away believing that Abner's mother had summoned up the ghost of Samuel, who told him that he would die the next day, along with his sons.

The next day battle was joined. Saul's army began to descend on to the plain very early, but the Philistines had got wind of their plans and had moved closer to Mt Gilboa in the night. As the army of the north was deploying on the plain, suddenly, out of the gloaming the Philistine chariots were upon them. The units destined to make up the first three of the five squares that had been planned were already on the plain, but not yet in formation. Two of the squares broke immediately and their soldiers began fleeing in all directions, but mostly

back up the hillside, where they infected those troops not yet deployed with panic. The foremost square, in which Saul and his sons were, defended itself very stoutly for a while, but seeing their compatriots in flight and unused to the whirl and fury of a battle involving chariots the troops in this square too began to panic. Jonathan and his brothers tried desperately to rally the men, but the square was overrun and Jonathan and his brothers were killed; Saul was wounded by an arrow and, seeing he was about to be captured, fell on his sword, and so died.

But on the heights above Abner had arrived with the reserve and gathered the scattered units together. When the news of the death of the King and his sons arrived there was renewed despair, but Abner commented laconically 'Saul has other sons'. And he ordered an advance down the hillside. The Philistines thought they had won the day and were beginning to celebrate victory when news arrived that Abner was still in the field with a large army and advancing towards them. Although they had overrun part of Saul's army the Philistines had suffered heavy casualties themselves, and, moreover, as always happens in engagements involving chariots, over half their chariots were now out of action, either because the horses had been killed or injured, or because the wheels or the shafts of the chariots themselves had been damaged. So they split their force in two, the smaller force pushed on past Abner's forces to Beth-shean, taking the remains of Saul and his sons with them. The remaining forces retreated towards the coast.

Abner divided his forces too, leaving the major part of them to follow the Philistines at a distance and pursuing the smaller force to Beth-shean with a small force himself. He was too late to prevent the arrival of the Philistines at the town, and watched from a nearby hill as the townsfolk derisively hung the bodies of Saul and his sons out on their walls, but, coincidentally, a large group of reinforcements from across the Jordan happened to arrive at that moment. Abner ordered an advance and the army swept down on the unsuspecting town and stormed it, killing the new garrison and many of the people. The rest they ordered to leave, and the next day they put the town to the torch. So Beth-shean was won by Israel after all.

Then Abner rejoined his main army and harried the Philistines back to their own country, snapping at their heels like a sheep-dog and cutting off many stragglers. Although the Philistines had killed Saul and his sons, their expedition had been a failure, as they lost many men and they had failed to help their ally. After this several towns in the north which still had maintained their independence and an alliance with the Philistines came over to Abner.

After this Abner took a surviving son of Saul, Eshbaal, and had him anointed King, and all the north did homage to him. But he was still a youth and Abner had all the real

power in the land. He transferred the capital of the north to Mahanaim across the Jordan, because this was his home-town.

David, when he heard the news that Saul and Jonathan had been killed was very sorrowful and tore his clothes and wept. Within a few weeks he had commissioned an elegy for them, which he sent around the whole land, and asked any one who could to perform it in memory of Saul and Jonathan. You will note how its structure consists largely of parallelism, which, as I noted before is a characteristic of our poetry:

The glory of Israel has perished on the mountain,  
How have the mighty been struck down!

Do not tell the news in Gath,  
Or speak it in the streets of Ashkelon,  
Lest the Philistine women rejoice,  
Lest the daughters of the enemies of the land exult.

Let there be no rain on the mountain of Gilboa,  
Nor any offerings made on its altars.  
For there Saul's shield was broken,  
His shield, unused for so long in war.

The bow of Jonathan,  
And the sword of Saul  
Did not fail to spill the blood of their enemies,  
Or to wound the flesh of the Philistines.

Saul and Jonathan, both handsome, both beloved,  
Were not divided in life or in death.  
They were more swift than eagles,  
And they were stronger than lions.

How have the mighty been struck down!  
Weep over Saul, women of Israel,  
Who clothed you well in scarlet,  
And gave you golden ornaments.

Jonathan lies dead on Gilboa,  
How I grieve for you my brother;  
You were very pleasing to me,  
Your love for me was better than the love of women.

How have the mighty fallen down,  
And the weapons of war been broken.

He also sent a message of special thanks to the people of Jabesh-gilead, who had made up most of the reinforcements who had helped Abner take Beth-shean. They had also taken the bodies of Saul and his sons and buried them in a place of honour near the town, partly as a memorial of how, early in his manhood, Saul had delivered them from their enemies.

David moved rapidly from Ziklag to Hebron and was acknowledged by the Elders and people of Judah as King, and he set up his court at Hebron. He ruled from Hebron for some five years before he became king in the north too and these years were in many ways a preparation for his rule over the whole land, just as he had used his time in Ziklag to prepare

for his rule in Judah. It was at about this time that I entered his court, having been employed by Abiathar as a scribe. I then took up some duties in the court, though I never had any importance or influence except in the matter of foreign policy, of which more anon. However I was constantly about the court and in the audience and council chambers, and knew all the actors in this story of this generation. Moreover I dined at court whenever the King was in residence, and frequently heard him talking about the events of his life, and once or twice he spoke with me personally about episodes in his life. As the organisation of his court which he established in Hebron remained essentially unchanged when he moved his court to Jerusalem, I think it would a good point in the narrative to describe now what David's court was like and what sort of man he was.

To begin with David, like Saul at Gibeah, had no specially-built or set-aside dwelling at Hebron. Instead he simply bought a block of houses in the centre of the city and knocked them all together to make one house. Indeed foreign visitors were often nonplussed to find that the King of Judah should live in a house that was indistinguishable, apart from the greater number of people going to and from it, from any of the other houses round about. His establishment, then and later, was a very military one, with soldiers constantly coming and going. The head of his army was his nephew Joab, whose brother Abishai we have already met accompanying David on the night-expedition to Saul's camp. It is the custom with us that when anyone attains sufficient wealth to appoint household officers he should always favour his immediate family first, as Saul did when he appointed *his* nephew Abner to be his chief general. Below Joab there were David's 'Three Mighty Men', who had personally distinguished themselves in battle or single combat and who acted as generals on occasions. These were Jashobeam, Eleazar the son of Dodo and Shammah the Hararite. Below them were his 'Thirty Chief Men' who could also act as commanders, who also advised on military matters, but who were mostly a sort of bodyguard, and their commander was Abishai. Many of these men came to David during his wanderings in Judah, and some after he arrived at Ziklag, but by the time he came to Hebron the number was almost complete and only one or two later joined the band. David also had a standing army, dispersed about in various towns, and many garrisons throughout the land, but for regular troops on hand at all times he had a force of Cretan and Philistine mercenaries stationed nearby. Finally he had a force of charioteers four hundred strong, who were all Judites, but who wore their hair in foreign fashion and dressed in outlandish uniforms and generally swaggered around and were a complete nuisance wherever they were stationed.

As to the non-military side of David's household, my master Abiathar was his priest, though David also favoured Zadok, a priest from Ephraim. Jehosophat was his chief accountant, and the chief scribe was Sheva. David did not much like the company of older

men and priests and preferred to talk with his soldiers and commanders, though he also favoured poets and musicians and he always delighted to hear a song well-sung. He himself continued to play very well on the lyre and he even composed songs, though, as he modestly put it, 'only love-songs'. However he also commissioned historical and religious compositions and was always keen to have them performed, and written down to preserve them. David did not, as the Kings of Egypt and Syria and Babylonia do, patronise artists much, because until this generation we have had no grand buildings, or much occasion to have brilliant art or decoration of whatever kind. Nevertheless he took care that all the utensils and fittings of his house should be elegant and well-made and the rooms decorated in cheerful colours and patterns.

He loved to live very simply, like a traditional land-owner. He ate only sparingly and only simple food and hardly drank at all. Most of all he loved to know how his own estates were doing, and when the harvest came he would always return to Bethlehem for the Ingathering. He loved gardens and wild places, and would always take great pains to construct beautiful gardens wherever he lived and to visit spots in the countryside where he knew there were wildflowers, or shady trees. He positively disliked hunting, and any form of cruelty to animals, such as bear-baiting, or bull-fighting. Although at appropriate times he would dress up in royal regalia, he mostly wore very simple clothes and he imposed his own simple tastes on his court, so that, although most of the men there were soldiers, it was not a haunt of ribaldry and drunkenness at all times, as most military establishments are. He could read and check accounts, but he could not read or write, incredible as it may seem to this generation, for whom writing is a matter of course. He started to learn many times, but, like many practical men, he was too impatient and expected to be able to read the next day, always giving up before more than a few days had elapsed.

He was, as I said, of more than average height, with very black hair and a ruddy, healthy complexion. He was not cruel and envious and wrathful as most great men are, though sometimes he would be led into cruel and foolish actions by a natural impetuosity. Sometimes in sheer exuberance he could demonstrate the most boyish delight at simple things—I have once seen him with a party from court standing outside in the garden showing off his prowess with the sling; he was asking people to point out individual fruits on an olive tree some fifty paces away and knocking each one down in turn with a single stone. As I have said he had the ability to charm anyone he met immediately, but, and I say this as one who served him for more than twenty years, and revere his memory, no one really liked him, however much they had to respect his achievements and his greatness. Although he was so charming, behind this charm was a void of sympathy; he had colleagues and old acquaintances, but no real friends, for anyone who associated with him came to realise that

not only did never care about anyone in any sense, but that it was also that he could not understand anyone else's feelings.

And this is best exemplified by his treatment of his wives and concubines. I have already narrated how Michal, David's first wife, was taken away from him by Saul and how he married Abigail, the widow of Asa. Subsequent to this he also married, when he was at Ziklag, Ahinoam, whose father was a very rich landowner from Jezreel in the north. As time went on David began to collect wives and marry them for the wealth or influence they would bring him, and in imitation of the customs of the kings of surrounding kingdoms; besides his wives he had many concubines for his pleasure. Now with us, as I said, a man may have as many wives as he pleases, but rarely do men have more than two or three, since it is expected that all will live together in one household, and it is expected that each wife will have the conjugal affection of her husband. Yet David had ten wives and many concubines. And David's habit was to make much of his latest wife or concubine, but then tire of her and desire another. It is noteworthy that except in two cases David never had more than one child by a wife. Moreover, as they could not come and go as women can in normal circumstances, for they had become, as it were, royal property, but had to remain locked up in the palace all the time, this was a cause for even greater discontent. Further, by taking so many concubines he devalued this form of marriage in a shameful way, for these women were little better than mistresses, and enjoyed no respect or station at court. But David had no conception of the cruelty he was inflicting on his wives and their discontent probably never registered with him. Yet this policy of his was later to have disastrous consequences.

Whilst ruling from Hebron, David made contacts all over the north and began to sway the people from the house of Saul. Abner himself realised that David, as the foremost commander in the land, was likely to supplant the house of Saul, as the Eshbaal was young and undistinguished, and almost at once he began secret negotiations with David with a view to handing the north over to him.

A meeting between Joab and Abner was arranged, near the border of the two kingdoms at Gibeon, where there was a land-mark, a very deep well. The two sides came with their retinues, though Joab came with many more men than Abner had expected, which put him on his guard. They ate together and afterwards, before the negotiations started, they had arranged to have an entertainment, a choreographed mock-combat between groups of youths from either side. Unfortunately this combat turned into a real one when one of the participants decided to strike a real, not a mock blow, and within moments both sides were battling in good earnest. As the northerners were the less numerous side they quickly gave way and fled, and Abner took to his chariot and made away. But the brother of Joab and Abishai, Asahel, pursued Abner on foot, for he was a very swift runner, and as the road was

very rocky and difficult he soon caught up with him and tried to leap on to the back of the chariot. Abner turned and fended him off with the butt-end of his spear because he did not want to hurt him, but unluckily Asahel fell awkwardly and dashed his head against a stone and died at once. His brothers coming along a few minutes later, picked him up and vowed vengeance. They pursued Abner all the way into Benjamin, to the village of Ammah, where there was a garrison; the troops turned out to defend their commander and Joab had to call a halt to the pursuit. Nevertheless, before going home, both men hurled insults at each other, though Abner was the more conciliatory, and indeed Joab may have secretly planned the whole episode, as he was jealous of Abner, and did not want to be supplanted in his command by the northerner.

After this Abner despaired of reaching a settlement and so he began to consolidate his power in the north. He married Rizpah, a former concubine of Saul, and now that powerful men had begun to consider women as pawns and possessions in the way that the rulers of other nations do, this was seen as a definite sign that Abner aspired to the throne. Eshbaal, finding some of his father's spirit, challenged Abner, who thereupon threatened to hand over the kingdom to David, and for the moment Eshbaal was silent.

Soon however Eshbaal began to plot against Abner, and Abner began to see that he would have to put his threats into action. He sent messengers directly to David, bypassing Joab, and David invited him to enter negotiations. He required, however, an immediate undertaking that Abner would return Michal to him. Abner agreed to this, gave the necessary orders, and journeyed to Hebron to confer with the King. At Hebron he and David agreed on the terms under which Abner would hand the north over to David, and David would rapidly have become King of the all the land, had not Joab, who had been absent from Hebron when Abner made his visit, got to hear of the agreement. Surmising correctly that the terms granted a great deal of power to Abner, power that Joab coveted for himself, he sent messengers as from the King asking Abner to return to Hebron. These caught up with him on his return journey and he turned about and came back to Hebron, and as he got down from his chariot by the door of the palace, Joab suddenly appeared and, without warning, stabbed him in the stomach, and he died immediately.

David was furious with Joab when he heard the news, for he knew it meant that the north would turn against him and slip from his hands. Joab escaped punishment because he could claim that he was merely revenging the death of his brother, and besides Joab and the military establishment were already too powerful for David to control fully. Nevertheless David ordered a day of mourning and fasting and mourned publicly himself and caused elegies to be performed for Abner, and buried him with many honours, so that the people of



the north knew that it was not David's doing to have Abner murdered. Nevertheless they still kept their allegiance with Eshbaal.

This young man soon began to show himself quite capable of ruling the north and had it not been for an unfortunate incident David may never have become King over Benjamin and the north. What happened was that two desperate men crept into the royal palace at Gibeah, to which town Eshbaal had returned after the death of Abner, and killed the King while he lay sleeping. They fled immediately to Hebron, carrying the Eshbaal's head and presented it to David, expecting to be rewarded. David naturally ordered the immediate execution of the two murderers, but otherwise the murder was most opportune for him, as there were no more surviving children of Saul, except one grandson Meribaal, who was crippled in both his legs. So the men of the north had no option but to come to David and ask him to be their King. And at last Samuel's prophecy had come true and David was King over the whole of the land.

## VIII

### King David

The very first thing that David did on being made king of the whole land was to move his capital. He had contemplated the move ever since it looked likely that he would become King. Hebron was too associated with Judah ever to be a satisfactory capital of the whole land and David had considered moving to one of the northern centres, such as Shechem. But in the end he decided to move to Jerusalem, which was located on the borders of Benjamin and Judah on one of the highest points of the hill-country. I mentioned before that there were several cities within the boundaries of the land who had never accepted the authority of Saul, such as Beth-shean. But after the fall of Beth-shean many of these capitulated to Abner. Now Jerusalem was one of the largest of these independent cities, and still held out. In part this was due to the fact that the people of the city and the surrounding area were a distinct group of people, the Jebusites. The city was very well-defended and well-provisioned and taking it seemed to be an impossible task. However, David believed that the risks and expense of trying would be worth it if he could secure as his capital a city that had been associated neither with Judah, nor the North, and which had such a splendid strategic position.

In the end taking Jerusalem proved to be expensive, but not risky. The city council were ready to negotiate a surrender, and when David gave them very easy terms, including the continuance of most of their privileges, they were delighted to accept a huge bribe to throw the city gates open. An amusing incident occurred in the council chamber on the day after David signed the agreement, when Joab entered with an enormous sheaf of maps and plans—for he had been working on a complicated plan to take Jerusalem by sending a party of men to climb up through the cisterns—only to be told that the city had already yielded. Before moving to Jerusalem David went on a quick tour of the north to be acclaimed King in all the northern centres, and then, two months after the city surrendered, the court made its ceremonial entrance.

But no sooner had they done this than news arrived that the Philistines had taken to the field. Whilst King at Hebron David had kept on good terms with Achish and had Achish continued to rule he would probably have been able to prevent the Philistines making war against David again. But he had been deposed by his council because he was too friendly with David and too pacific in his policies. Once again the Philistines were trying to destroy the threat they perceived that the people of the land posed to them, and this time they tried to march directly on Jerusalem, to take the city that had once been an ally of theirs and to drive

a wedge between Judah and the north. One Philistine army marched from Azekah, passed Socoh and seized Bethlehem, in an attempt to cut David off from Judah. But the Judites came up against them with a strong force and blockaded them in the town. Another army marched up the Valley of Rephaim, and David met them in battle at Baal-perazim. Here David met them for the first time on equal terms, as his forces were as numerous, as well-trained and as well-equipped as theirs. And he defeated them utterly after only an hour of fighting. The Philistines fled the field in complete confusion, leaving behind all their baggage, and fled to the north via Gibeon, Beth-horon and so to Gezer. Of the army that set out less than a quarter returned to Philistia.

Turning south David and his forces advanced on the southern army at Bethlehem, which began to retreat, but it did not give ground easily and it was over a month before the Philistines were pushed back past Azekah. During this campaign David fell into an ambush, and his company was surrounded and very hard-pressed. If Abishai had not happened to come along with reinforcements the King would have been killed or captured, and so afterwards David agreed with his generals that he would not take to the field in person again, as his survival was very important to the survival of the new Kingdom.

Also during this campaign a very amusing incident took place. The Philistines had brought with their army a giant of Gath, called Goliath. Now some men are very tall, like Saul, or the Philistine champion whom David killed, but none of these men is ever taller than seven feet. However sometimes there are giants of much greater stature, and Goliath was the tallest of these, the tallest man who has ever lived, for he was nine feet tall. Yet when such giants are found to be so tall they are also invariably weak and feeble-minded and have to be cared for like children all their lives. And Goliath was one such, for he could not speak and dribbled and could not stand unaided; he also had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot. The Philistines had brought him along as a sort of mascot, rather as some armies will have a lion cub, or a bear cub as their mascot.

Anyway part of a company of Philistines which were garrisoning a small town in the Valley of Elah, not knowing that the enemy were so near, were taking time off in a meadow near the town, and they had Goliath with them, sitting in an ass-cart. The Judites descended and attacked them without warning and they fled, but in the panic the asses drawing the cart on which Goliath was sitting bolted. When the Judites followed the track that the asses had taken they came upon Goliath lying dead by the road—he had been thrown from the cart and broken his neck. When the Judites returned to carrying their giant booty there was great hilarity and Elhanan of Bethlehem, who had commanded the company grew famous overnight, for someone wrote a parody of the song of thanksgiving that had greeted David when he slew the Philistine champion, and the refrain now ran:

David has slain thousands,  
But Elhanan has killed an elephant!

The Philistines had been defeated, and defeated for the last time, for it will be order here to run ahead of events and narrate how David dealt with the Philistines. David, during the next few years, made contacts with the Lords of the Five Cities and secured their surrender. Philistia became a province of David's kingdom and garrisons were lodged in all the main towns and cities. And David reinstated Achish as Lord of Gath. Yet David was very moderate in victory, for he understood that most of the population of Philistia, the peasantry, were the descendents of the people of the land. Once he took care that the unjust impositions that the Philistines had levied on them were removed, then the Philistines lost much of their wealth and importance, even though David allowed them to keep their lands. As well he took care to eliminate the military culture of the Philistines, by forbidding anyone to have more than one weapon of any kind for each man in their household, and to practise military training, and by forbidding anyone to breed special war-horses (for the horses that are used to pull war-chariots are a special breed, and ordinary horses are too weak and too easily frightened to be any good for this purpose). Within a very few years Philistia had become a peaceful, prosperous province, and the Philistines even began to forget their own language and to use the language of the people of the land, so that, at the time I write, perhaps a generation later, the Philistine language is almost extinct.

David decided that he would pay more attention to building in Jerusalem than he did in Hebron. There was no special palace in Jerusalem, for although in the distant past people remember that Jerusalem had had kings—indeed it is said that one Mechizedek, King of Jerusalem, greeted Abraham as he entered the land—latterly they had had only a Council of Elders consisting of seventy-two members. David began to build a palace for himself. And when he heard this Hiram, King of Tyre, sent David a present of many large cedar logs from the mountains of Phoenicia, for he wanted to be on good terms with David and he knew that in our land there few areas with large trees, for most of our hills have been denuded by our animals, and the lowlands cleared for agriculture, and the few forest that are left are on such poor soils that the trees are small and stunted. But these logs were sixty or seventy feet long and of most beautiful grain and colour and perfume, for they come from the great coniferous forest that grow on the colder, wetter mountains to the north. With these David was able to build halls and chambers of a magnificence that had never been seen before in the land.

One building that Jerusalem did possess was a fine temple of El, and another, almost as large, of Asherah. David decided, as one of his first decisions, that he would make this shrine a sort of national shrine and to that end he sent around to the various shrines all over the land asking them for sacred objects to place at the temple in Jerusalem. Now in doing this

he was not asking the shrines to send him their most sacred objects, so, for example, he could not have requested the Golden Bull of Shechem. But every shrine has a great deal of paraphernalia and clutter that people have dedicated to it over the centuries, and many priests and temple-guardians were only too happy to have a clear out and send all sorts of unlikely things along. And David dedicated various things in his possession, such as the Philistine champion's sword, and Elhanan, incidentally, dedicated the bones of Goliath, glad to rid of them. And David also remembered the sacred chest from Shiloh that had been captured by the Philistines and which had been sitting for two generations at Kiriath-jearim. As Shiloh had not been rebuilt, David decided to send for that too.

All the sacred objects were transported over the next few months and laid up at a small shrine just outside the city, in preparation for their ceremonial entrance at the time of the Ingathering festival. David had suggested that a group of Ephraimites might like to accompany the sacred chest from Kiriath-jearim and a large group turned up. They were understandably rather angry that the chest was not being returned to them, but was going to Jerusalem, and their anger took a tragic form when, nearing Jerusalem, one of the priests from Kiriath-jearim, Uzzah, walking beside the cart on which the chest was being transported, put out his hand and touched the chest to steady it as the cart went over a bump. The Ephraimites were so incensed at this sacrilege, as they saw it, though Uzzah and his fellow-priests had touched the chest in loading it without provoking divine wrath, that they stoned him to death immediately. David was furious at this, and wanted to punish the Ephraimites, but he realised that this would create bad feeling in the north, and so contented himself with sending them back to Ephraim in disgrace.

When all the sacred objects had been assembled, and there were some thirty or forty to be transported, the procession moved off led by the King, with instruments and singers and a grand procession of soldiers and notables from all over the kingdom. But as this procession was nearing Jerusalem a strange thing happened: David seemed to be overtaken with a similar sort of frenzy to that which Saul had shown at Gibeah, though in this case we cannot allege drugged wine as the cause, for David had taken no wine at all that day. It seems that he was genuinely inspired by El, for as he walked he began to sway and dance and before long he had thrown off his regalia and begun to leap and cavort in the manner of the shepherds of Bethlehem at their spring festival, and he kept this up for over an hour as the procession wound up the hill towards the city and through the city-streets to the temple.

That very day Michal arrived from the north. She had been taken away from her husband Paltiel by Abner almost two years previously, and, after Abner's death had been detained in Gibeah by her half-brother Eshbaal. Then, after his death, there had been the wars with the Philistines, and finally David had asked her to wait until after the sacred objects had

been dedicated at the temple before she made the journey. However, as I said, she had arrived on that very day, perhaps too impatient to wait any longer. On her arrival she had been taken to the women's quarters in the palace, where she had been shocked to learn of the number of wives and concubines that David had amassed (and indeed he was to have several more) and the strict conditions that the women of the palace had to observe. She had also heard reports throughout the afternoon that the King was dancing ecstatically in front of the procession and spreading astonishment amongst the crowds. It is difficult to know how she felt about David after the years that had gone by since their parting. Perhaps she loved Paltiel, certainly he loved her, for when Abner had taken her away Paltiel had followed the carriages on foot weeping and lamenting, and Abner had had to get down and tell him to home and stop making a fool of himself; she had born five children to Paltiel, whom she had had to leave behind in the north. Or perhaps it was her captivity at Gibeah and the prospect of another form of captivity at Jerusalem that rankled with her. For when David returned to the palace and greeted her, she, in front of the whole court, burst out in reproaches about his dancing in front of the people 'like a peasant buffoon'. David for his part answered: 'El destroyed your father's house and has exulted mine and therefore I honour him with my dancing.' And he swept on. He never spoke to Michal, or so much as looked at her again all the days of his life, yet he kept her in the palace, where she lived the life of a lonely widow.

So David ruled the whole land from Jerusalem and I should now like to give an account of his reign, as I have given an account of his ascent to power. But in this I shall abandon strict chronological narrative for a time and divide the subject matter up into three parts—the remainder of this chapter and the next two chapters—firstly the foreign conquests that David made, secondly the domestic and religious policies that he pursued, and finally the divisions within David's own house, his old age and the succession to his throne.

But firstly his foreign conquests; these are quickly told, for these battles and campaigns were not small-scale guerilla warfare, as his campaigns against the Philistines had been, but large-scale wars fought in open country by large professional armies, and these are therefore of less interest than the battles of earlier in his career. The first was the conquest of Moab, for the old King of Moab, who had treated David's family well when they had taken refuge with him, had died, and the succession had been wrested from his family by another family. But David intervened and sent his army to crush the usurpers. As there were no relatives of the old dynasty left, the usurpers having massacred them, David did not appoint another King, but a Governor. However, David's Moabite ancestry and connections counted for much in Moab and few resented foreign rule on the easy terms that David gave them.

The next series of conquests started when David sent ambassadors to the new King of Ammon, across the Jordan, to congratulate him on his accession. This King, Hanun,

instead of accepting their congratulations treated them in an abominable manner, having their beards shaved off and having his servants beat them and tear their clothes and turn them out half-naked on the highway. Why he did this is not known, perhaps he was young and foolish and elated with his new royal power, or perhaps he wanted to provoke a war with David before David's new kingdom was properly united, or had grown stronger. For the Ammonites have been the constant enemies of the people of the land and between them and the Philistines the people often had no peace. That Hanun wanted war is supported by the fact that as soon as he had insulted the ambassadors he ordered Aramaean mercenaries from the north to help him.

David at once dispatched Joab and his army to Ammon, who arrived just as the Aramaeans were arriving from the north. Joab moved fast against the Ammonites, putting them to flight, whilst dispatching Abishai to meet the mercenaries. Abishai put them to flight before Joab returned from beating the Ammonites. There then followed a difference of opinion in the military circles; seeing that Ammon had been so easily defeated Joab wanted to go on and take the capital Rammah and depose Hanun. His argument was that, with Moab, Ammon would constitute a defensive barrier against attacks on the kingdom from the east. David, however, pointed out that the conquest of Ammon would not stop attacks on his kingdom from the north and that no one lived beyond Ammon who might attack the kingdom, but there was only desert, so that the only important thing was that the Ammonites should be friendly to us.

In the event, however, Hanun and his allies decided to renew the war next season and this time even more mercenaries from Aram and from Syria proper, beyond the Euphrates, were employed. This campaign was serious enough for David to come out in person on campaign and the combined Aramaean and Ammonite armies were again soundly beaten, and Rabbah was besieged. Although the city sustained a bitter siege of two years, in the end it fell, Hanun dying in the fighting, and Ammon was annexed to the kingdom. David made Hanun's brother Shobi Governor of Ammon.

During these two campaigns one of the leading figures in the campaign against David was Hadadezer, King of Zobah, which is the northern part of the area we call Aram. The year after the second defeat of the Ammonites, whilst Rabbah was still besieged, David led an army north, taking advantage of Hadadezer's absence across the Euphrates, and defeated the forces he met with. Hadadezer was deposed in his absence and the whole of Aram, including the region to the north-east, called Hamath, paid tribute to David and admitted his garrisons, and thus his kingdom stretched to the Euphrates.

Finally, a few years later, David took advantage of another dynastic squabble to annex Edom in the south, thus gaining access to the port of Elath, on the Southern Sea.

However the servants of the previous king fled to Egypt taking his son, Hadad, with them. Moreover the campaign to crush the resistance that broke out was a very bloody one, as the Edomites are as jealous of their own independence as we are of ours. Joab killed, on one occasion, no fewer than eight thousand men.

If I have run quickly through these campaigns and seem to have given less importance to what most people would regard as David's greatest achievements I must be excused. For firstly these battles took place far outside the land of Canaan, whereas other battles that I have narrated took place at places I know well and therefore could better relate the actual conduct of these battles. Secondly David's early campaigns were desperate affairs, in that they were fought against a national enemy and therefore concerned everyone in the land, whereas these later battles were fought between professional armies, and therefore were only of concern to them. Finally I believe that these foreign conquests of David were partly a mistake. The conquests of Moab and Edom may endure, for David's family, as I said before, have Moabite and Edomite connections, and these two kingdoms may come in time to feel themselves to be part of the land. Again it was necessary for the defence of the kingdom to tame Ammon and as the King of Ammon proved obdurate, to depose him. But I feel that David's conquests in Aram were a fruitless exercise, for his authority in these provinces was never more than nominal, and at the first signs of a renaissance of power in either Aram itself, or from Syria across the Euphrates, these provinces will disappear like morning mist. There is an argument that such provinces gain much revenue, but in my judgement such revenue only serves to increase the importance and expense of the armed forces of the imperial power. I have noticed that in great and mighty nations the people are always poor and impoverished and groaning under the burden of taxation and extortion to pay the huge cost of large armies. And this is to say nothing of the devastation and misery that these powers inflict on the countries they attempt to rule.

In fact, incredible as it may sound, during the whole period of time covered by this narrative, both Egypt and Syria numbered the lands of Canaan and the surrounding countries as part of their empires. Remember that the Philistines entered the land as mercenaries to garrison the cities of the coast, and how the larger cities of Canaan were nominally allies of either Egypt or Syria. Well, no doubt during all the period that the Philistines and Saul and David were fighting over the land, scribes in Egypt and Syria were filing paperwork relating to these 'provinces' of their 'empire'. However in reality at this time neither power was strong enough to so much as put an army in the field, much less control any of their former provinces.

In fact it was in the area of foreign policy that I myself had my only direct influence on policy in David's reign. David had begun to think, early in his reign at Jerusalem, of how



he should approach his relations with these two great powers. For when he was King of Judah neither Egypt or Syria deigned to make contacts with him, but when he became ruler of the united land, they then began to court him. David had begun to favour an Egyptian alliance, because, in terms of days' march, Egypt is closer than Syria. However, Abiathar recommended me to David as someone who had visited both countries and could comment on the wisdom of this policy. For when I was young my uncle, a merchant, had taken me in his party all around the cities of Syria and Babylonia, as a bookkeeper, and whilst the rest of the party sat all day at businesses lunches and receptions I would be in the libraries and archives studying the history of the cities and nations of that area. And later I spent three years in Egypt, studying at a scribal school.

I told David that I thought that neither Syria, nor Egypt, were about to resume their imperial pretensions just yet, but that of the two Syria was the more likely to become a great power again. I told David that I couldn't quite say why I thought this, but that when I was in Egypt I felt that the great days of that nation had gone for ever, and that it would never again be a great power. I think it was mainly to do with the settled conviction I met with in everyone I spoke to in that land, from every section of society, that Egypt's great days had departed, coupled with a feeling, just as often expressed, that this was no bad thing—in every imperial nation a sort of general illusion of confidence and greatness is always found, and its absence in Egypt was very noticeable, and very welcome. And indeed Egypt has been a great power since, some say, the beginning of time, and may be now in its senescence, as it were, whereas in Syria different powers have come and gone, ruling from different centres, and there all the people still believe in their destiny to be a great nation.

And so David, taking my advice, concluded an alliance with neither power, but instead when the Egyptian ambassadors pressed him told them that there was nothing that could do his Kingdom greater honour than an alliance with Egypt, but that this would provoke Syria, so they must be content to take his word that, in any other situation, he could openly declare himself, but that presently the most he could offer was an assurance that if it ever came to warfare between the two powers he would unfailingly side with Egypt. To the Syrian ambassadors he said much the same thing, only substituting Syria for Egypt in the rigmarole. And the result was peace, for, no doubt, Pharaoh thought: 'I am disappointed that David refuses a formal alliance to me, but on the other hand he has said that he will act as my ally in all cases, so his kingdom can serve as a buffer between Syria and my provinces.' And no doubt the King of Syria, in his palace at Assur, thought much the same thing.

## IX

### A Question of Policy

I have described already how David's rule might be described as a mild one. For he was not a cruel man himself and understood that for a disparate kingdom like his own mildness was a good policy for a ruler. And yet he was quite autocratic in his inclinations, as most men who have risen to eminence by their own efforts are, so I believe that much of his mildness in fact flowed from a sort of laziness, a disposition that inclined him always to take the easiest course, as for example in the way he allowed Joab and his generals to take the initiative at moments of crisis. A good example of the way he was thus torn between this laziness and his conscience is shown by his actions towards the house of Saul. We have seen already that when Michal offended him he simply ignored her, though not releasing her from her imprisonment in the palace. I doubt if thoughts of her even crossed his mind once in the ensuing months and years.

A year or so after this incident the Gibeonites sent word to David that they had in their custody seven of Saul's family, namely two sons of his by Rizpah, the concubine whom Abner had married, and the five sons of Merab, Saul's daughter. The Gibeonites wanted to execute all these men for the crimes that Saul had perpetrated against them during his rule. Now everything spoke against this request, the crimes of Saul against the Gibeonites had happened years before, and in any case they were simply part of a war between Benjamin and the Gibeonites which had been in progress for generations—the sort of the war where all questions of ultimate guilt and innocence are meaningless, because lost in time. Secondly the accusations against Saul should not have led to the revenge-killings of his relatives, most of whom were babes-in-arms at the time of the alleged offences, and lastly the Gibeonites had kidnapped the men, quite illegally, and smuggled them in secrecy into their own territory.

Yet David did not reject their request, reasoning that the Gibeonites would execute the men anyway and that all that would happen if he did refuse permission is that he would have to become involved in a costly war to reduce the Gibeonites. He may also have thought that it would be a useful thing to have the remaining descendants of Saul put out of the way. Yet when Eshbaal was killed none of the seven men was even considered for the throne of the north, as the children of concubines are not considered legitimate, though they are provided for, in Benjamin, nor can a man inherit through the female line. So, to the shame of the nation, the Gibeonites executed these seven men with David's approval, and hung their bodies on a gibbet in the countryside outside Gibeon.

However Rizpah, hearing of the insult offered to the bodies of her sons, journeyed to Gibeon and camped out under the gibbet, this was at the beginning of the harvest, to protect the bodies from being devoured by birds of prey and scavenging beasts. She stayed there until the beginning of the autumn, and not even the Gibeonites felt able to interfere with her. She so stirred up general sentiment against the killers that in the end they allowed her to take the bodies away for a decent burial.

Voices had been raised against David too and after this he felt the need to pacify public feeling. He suddenly remembered that the bodies of Saul and his sons were still buried in Jabesh-gilead, where they had been taken after the men of the Trans-Jordan had rescued the remains from the walls of Beth-shean. Despite the fact that it was nearly ten years since this occurred it suddenly became very important to have the bodies exhumed and taken back to Benjamin, to Saul's family's tomb at Zela, and this was done. David also searched out Meribaal, the crippled grandson of Saul, his last surviving descendent. He had been living in partial hiding in poverty in the north, fearing possible persecution by the new regime. But David took him into his household, and granted him lands and income and ordered that he dine every day at the royal table. But despite the fact that Meribaal was Jonathan's son I doubt whether he ever ate an untroubled meal at David's table, for one could never tell with the King whether his conscience was genuine or politic.

Another example of the way in which David often was not active enough as King is the manner in which he ran affairs in the north. In Judah there existed the Council of Elders, which functioned as a law-court and as a legislative body, as we would now call it, though in those days their rulings were entirely oral. David allowed this body to continue to function exactly as it had always done. Similarly in the cities which David had won, or which Saul or Abner had won, the city-councils were allowed to continue as they had done previously, the only difference being that the revenues now flowed to David, instead of to the city coffers. However in the north, that is in Benjamin, Ephraim, Manasseh and the other areas around them, within the land there was no overarching authority as they had never been truly united into one political system. Saul had let this situation continue under his rule, but his kingdom had not been as extensive as David's; with greater commerce and trade with the other parts of the Kingdom the north began to feel the need for a legal and decision-making system, but David would not ordain one and nor would he enter into the role of judge with any enthusiasm. The result was there was confusion and conflict and much litigation in the north which could not be solved without royal intervention. But this David did not provide and it began to be thought by many that David was deliberately sustaining this state of affairs so that the north was perpetually divided and weak.

And nothing confirmed this view more than the way in which David allowed settlers from Judah, which of all parts of the Kingdom was the area least-affected by the wars with the Philistines, and therefore most populous and prosperous, to settle wherever in the land there were vacant lands and razed cities. The inhabitants of these areas naturally felt that they had prior claim to these areas, which were often very fertile, or situated on trade-routes and main-highways, but the Judites were more organised and could promise to begin to pay special taxes within two or three years, whereas the original inhabitants were frequently destitute on their own lands, and unable to offer such tribute to David. And so these settlements were allowed to continue unchecked and were, indeed, encouraged.

In David's Council there were two parties, the Traditionalists and the Monarchists. The Traditionalists, led by my master Abiathar, believed that David should think of himself in the role of a traditional judge, called by El to govern the land, but only with the consent of the people and only according to traditional sanction. So in the main they supported David's mild rule, though when this resulted in the sort of confusion and lack of direction that I have just described with regard to the north, then they believed that David should create new machinery of government to remove these problems, though if possible in a traditional spirit. The Monarchists on the other hand, whose chief representative was Zadok the Ephraimite priest, believed that David should make his kingdom one single and consolidated political entity like those of Egypt or Babylonia, by sweeping away all the previous institutions and introducing a uniform system of government, governors, tax-collectors and so forth. However, the Monarchists also relied on a religious argument, they said that El had seen the sufferings of the people of the land and realised that the forces opposing them were too powerful for judges with only circumscribed powers to deal with. They argued that El had created a new kind of government for the land, a monarchy, one which partook on earth of the splendour of El's own heavenly court and reflected a small part of its glory.

It will be understood that the military faction was on the whole on the side of the Monarchists, as it was important to the military, as they saw it, to maintain their influence by having a regular system of taxation to pay their wages, and a system of provincial governors, who, naturally, would be recruited from the ranks of senior officers. Joab, on the other hand, was temperamentally a Traditionalist, and often inclined to side with us on contentious issues, and his voice carried a lot of weight in Council. But he was also always in need of money, for he was a man of quite extraordinary hospitality and generosity (it is said that visiting ambassadors could be forgiven for mistaking his house in Jerusalem for the Royal Palace), and would side with whichever side of an issue he thought would be to his financial advantage.

David for his part was also, temperamentally, a Traditionalist, but could often be swayed by the argument of the Monarchists. Fortunately his revenue was so healthy that he did not have to rely on any one measure or other to balance the books, but his private wealth went on increasing, despite the fact that there was no general taxation in his Kingdom. In the first place he had the spoils of the Philistines and those whom he had fought against in the early days of his career, secondly he had taken over wealth of Saul's house when the north had made him King. Thirdly he had the revenues of all the cities that had yielded to him, and the booty and tribute he had gained from Edom, Moab, Ammon and Aram, and the tribute that continued to flow in from Tyre and Hamath and Zobah. Fourthly he had the custom-tolls from the three main roads through his Kingdom. Fifthly, when he requested sacred objects to furnish the temple in Jerusalem most of the shrines had thought it best to donate large amounts of gold and silver as well. Sixthly, he married several of his wives for their wealth, and for the influence they would bring him in their home districts. Finally David was always investing in business deals, my own family, a notable family of merchants, were often his partners in investment and trade, and most of these were highly successful.

Often when we consider the decisions taken by the King during his reign we find that they were decisions taken by him which compromised neatly between the demands of the Monarchists and the criticism of the Traditionalists. For example a minister in charge of forced labour was appointed, one Adoram. But forced labour was not exacted except in Ammon and in a very few other cases, notably around Jerusalem, and this mainly for useful things like roads and bridges and cisterns and so forth to which the people could hardly object. But at the same time the precedent had been set. More contentious was the census that Joab undertook, for a census is a prerequisite for a general taxation and for a general levy of forced labour, as everyone realised. Joab went the rounds of the Kingdom, though he omitted Benjamin, knowing that this tribe was far too troublesome and rebellious to be assessed in what was to be only a trial-run for a future census. Even though the decision of the Council, emended by the Traditionalists, laid down that this census was for information only and not to be the basis for any future legislation, Joab went about with a heavy heart, hating to stir up so much animosity. He started in the east, beyond the Jordan and worked his way up to the north, and then down the length of the land to Beer-sheba in southern Judah, and took nine months to appoint the necessary officers and assessors, and after this he returned to Jerusalem. The returns dribbled in over the next few months, mostly incomplete or manifestly inflated, or underestimated, and from this the extent to which public feeling was outraged by such an assertion of royal authority was obvious. Thus no further action was taken in the matter.

But I must not omit a most interesting debate that took place between the two factions in the Council Chamber. This occurred early in David's reign, long before the census, and could well be said to have defined for the first time the two opposing parties in David's Council. As I was myself present as Abiathar's scribe, I took a shorthand account of the debate, so that, apart from some tiresome rhetoric which I have omitted, these are the very words that were spoken, and when I myself spoke I obtained afterwards another shorthand account, so that I could check my memory of what I said. I should say that the procedure of these councils was that David would sit on a chair on a dais, below him all the council members would sit in a semi-circle on the floor, each with their notes in their laps. Behind them was another semi-circle, of scribes, to take notes for their masters and to pass them more documents or papers as required. The King too had his scribe at his right hand. The debate would open with the King calling on either Abiathar or Zadok, depending on which faction had sponsored the debate, to give his arguments for the proposal, and then he would ask the other to argue against the proposal. Then he himself would ask any questions he might wish to, or call for any of the papers referred to and have his scribe read them to him again, then he would call on anyone in the council to have their say, or to call witnesses, if required. He would then either sum up and give his decision, or announce he needed more time to consider the matter. If he gave a decision, one would either be posted as an official minute a few days later, or he would reconvene the Council to give his judgement. But usually nothing further was ever said and the matter remained outstanding, perhaps to be resolved by executive action on the King's part at some later date.

On this occasion the matter to be debated was under the vague title of 'On the Organisation of the Kingdom', and Abiathar and myself hardly knew what to expect. David called on Zadok to open the debate, and this is what he said:

'Your Majesty, Honourable Members of the Council, there has been much talk in these Council meetings about the providence of El in selecting our glorious and gracious monarch to rule in this land. But I feel that we have not truly understood El's design for us while we continue to debate the best means of governing this land as crises arrive, or particular case by particular case. I believe that we should look rather to the blessings that El has shown us in the past, and in the present, and from them deduce the ideal form for the government of this Kingdom, so that its organisation can better reflect El's plan for us. I have been conducting research into the traditions of this land over the last few months and I have come to the conclusion that much uncertainty exists about who we are, who our ancestors were and what they did and what this signifies for our present policy. Accordingly it seems to me that we should take more trouble to enquire carefully amongst these traditions, select the most trustworthy of them and follow these. I have begun a preliminary exercise and I should like to

share my results with you and to make a few suggestions about how this should affect our policies.’

At this he motioned to two attendants, one of whom moved forward with a large roll of parchment, and, bowing, he spread it out at the feet of the King. The other attendant passed around small slips of paper, one for each councillor, and we looked at these. On them was written neatly the following words:

**Leah:**

Reuben  
Simeon  
Levi  
Judah  
Issachar  
Zebulun

**Zilpah:**

Gad  
Asher

**Rachel:**

Joseph  
Benjamin

**Bilhah:**

Dan  
Naphtali

The map, as far as we could see it, for it was laid rightway up for the King, upside down to us, was a colourfully-drawn map of the Kingdom, with subdivisions drawn in red ink. Zadok continued:

‘The purest tradition I have been able to find lays down that our ancestor Israel had twelve sons, and I have provided a list of them here, arranged under their respective mothers, for Israel had two wives and two concubines, Leah and Rachel, and Zilpah and Bilhah. Joseph, of course, was the father of Ephraim and Manasseh. During a time of drought in the land the twelve sons of Israel journeyed to Egypt and lived there for some generations. But after a time the Egyptians began to oppress them and enslave them, so El ordained that they should escape from the land, and, after wandering the wilderness, should invade the land they had once left and conquer its inhabitants and divide the country between the tribes who were descended from the sons of Israel, Joseph’s tribe forming a double tribe. This tradition was passed down amongst the guardians of the sacred chest of Shiloh, and unfortunately obscured when the Philistines took the chest and killed the sons of Eli, and razed Shiloh to the ground. But some of the priests and assistants fled from Shiloh to Shechem, and it is from them I have had this tradition.’

People were blinking hard and frowning as Zadok spoke, for what he said seemed to make a kind of sense, but it also contradicted a great deal of what they half-remembered from their education. As for myself I was fascinated by this tradition, and longed to hear more, even though I knew that it could not be true, and could not be a genuine tradition, but an artificial one that Zadok had created himself for his own ends. For I omitted to mention earlier that Zadok was originally from Shechem, that he had appeared one day at David’s court as a representative of the northern priestly establishment, but that since the move to Jerusalem he had been as thick as thieves with the Jerusalem priesthood. In the slight pause that Zadok made here Abiathar leant back and whispered:

‘This sounds like your department, Shammah, I’ll let you speak about the tradition that he is proposing.’

With my belly twisting in nervousness I listened to Zadok’s further words:

‘This original distribution of the land was done in a divinely-inspired way, so that every tribe had, according to its numbers, ample land for its needs. But in the course of time and in the course of wars with outside enemies such as the Philistines the original distribution of the tribes has been forgotten and most people are unaware of their true tribal affiliation. My proposal is that now our land is at peace and united under a wise and pious sovereign, we should act to reinstate the original distribution of land within the Kingdom and to legislate a system of political organisation which reflects better El’s original purpose for his people. The



map I have prepared shows what these original tribal area looked like and how we might recreate them.’

And with that he motioned us to look at the map. David, who had been sitting quietly all this time, without any obvious reaction to Zadok’s speech, indicated that we could rise and gather closer around the map. We did so and I looked with interest at the plan, for Zadok had taken the standard map of David’s Kingdom and drawn a thick blue line around its boundaries with Phoenicia, the kingdoms to the north and east that David was at that time campaigning against, and with Moab and Edom, the nomads of the desert and the country of the Philistines. Within this area the principal towns and cities were marked, but, and this was the new feature, within the land there were thirteen areas limned out with red borders in between and neat little titles indicated which portion belonged to which tribe. In the south Judah’s territory looked familiar, except that in the south-west a portion had been carved out with the legend ‘Simeon’ attached, and just above another enclave was labelled ‘Levi’. In the north the territory of Benjamin, Ephraim and Manasseh looked correct, but where the country of the Gibeonites was the legend ‘Dan’ was affixed. Across the Jordan there were two areas carved out of southern Manasseh, namely Gad and Reuben. Finally in the far north there were four little areas clustered around the Sea of Chinnereth, labelled with the names Issachar, Zebulun, Asher and Naphtali. Across the lower part of the map in larger letters the word ‘Judah’ had been written, and across the upper part ‘Israel’; Jerusalem was prominently marked.

‘This,’ concluded Zadok, ‘Should be the basis for the reorganisation of the Kingdom, El’s Kingdom, under his Anointed, our gracious Lord, David.’

The King smiled at this conclusion and turned to Abiathar and said:

‘And what have you to say?’

Abiathar rose and spoke:

‘Your Majesty, Honourable Members of the Council, I have always maintained in the Council that we should be diligent in suggesting improvements and in pointing out deficiencies in the government of this Kingdom to our gracious Lord the King. However I have also always believed that such recommendations as we do produce should not be novelty for the sake of novelty, or complete change for the sake of the complete change, but that what is good about traditional arrangements should be preserved and what is bad emended. What Zadok the Priest is proposing now is a complete reorganisation of the way that the land is governed and I would oppose this scheme for the reason I have already given—I believe that the government of most of the land is as good as it can be, and as for those parts where it is not, then there is no reason why this cannot be emended. As Zadok has not told us how these new units of administration should be governed, or what improvement

we can expect in the revenue or prosperity of the land consequent on them, I cannot comment any further on what he has proposed. However I should like to ask my scribe Shammah to speak now, as can better deal with the historical aspect of Zadok's argument.'

He sat down, and I rose; the King nodded to me and I began:

'Your Majesty, Honourable Members of the Council, it is an honour for me to speak in front of this august body and I trust that my words will be few and to the point. Firstly I should say that I am not a priest, but that even if I were I would hesitate to speak so definitely of the plans that El has for us as Zadok has.'

(You must understand here that debate in the council was quite free, and everyone spoke their minds; Zadok was no friend of mine and I had no reason to be over squeamish in my choice of words with which to refute him).

'When I was young the Priest who instructed us told us that El had laid down seven rules for the conduct of his people, which were: Not to misuse his Name; To honour your father and mother; Not to commit murder; Not to commit adultery; Not to steal; Not to bear false witness and Not to covert anyone else's possessions. Once we had learnt these he told us that these were the complete rule for life and that if we obeyed them we would always prosper, but that if we did not, or if we associated with those who did not, then we would not prosper. I expect everyone here was taught much the same thing.'

There were murmurs of assent throughout the room and the King nodded.

'But to go from this to argue that El has some special purpose in certain events that happen and that this purpose can be determined unequivocally seems to me to be going beyond anything that our religion can teach us. I thank El daily that he has favoured David our King, and rescued us from our enemies, but I cannot say definitely that El wants our King to act in this way or that, for courses of political action are never as clear-cut in their morality as individual actions, and all I can say, I believe, is that one course of events *seems* to be more just, or more prudent, or more righteous than another.'

I looked round to gauge the reaction of the Council and the King, but everyone, including David, was sitting inscrutably through this disquisition on divine will, so I continued:

'As for the historical argument that Zadok has given vent to, it is a very ingenious one, but not one which anyone who has made a study of the traditions and antiquities of this land can assent to with enthusiasm. What Zadok seems to have done is to construct a tradition out of many different ones, to suit his desire for a divinely-ordered kingdom. But this new order is itself dependent on the tradition, so the whole argument is a circular one.'

'As to the details of the argument, let me say that all the names Zadok gives for the sons of Israel are familiar ones, they are local ancestors and heroes revered in different parts of the

land, but Zadok has yoked them together as sons of Israel, which few of them are claimed to be by those who revere them. For example Judah: we Judites hold him to be a descendent of Abraham, and I am surprised, incidentally, that Zadok did not try to cobble all the Aramaean ancestors from around the land into his argument. For example, he could have made Isaac a son of Abraham, and Israel a son of Isaac, or perhaps a son of Jacob, or perhaps he could have told us that Jacob and Israel are one and the same person! Anyway these sons of Israel are organised into two groups by Zadok, the first of which are held to be the sons of Rachel and Bilhah, and correspond to the tribe of Joseph and its allies, namely the Danites, the Benjamites and some people in the north, who revere Naphtali as an ancestor. But on the map Zadok has surely misplaced the Danites, which are located, according to him, in the area that the Gibeonites now inhabit. As to Judah and its allies, whom Zadok makes sons of Leah and Zilpah, I see that Zadok has cleverly taken heroes and ancestors from people of the north who are traditionally allied with Judah, such as those to the south-west of the Sea of Chinnereth, whom he calls Issachar and Zebulun, and those nearer the sea-coast, whom he calls Asher, and he is correct to say that across the Jordan there are people who have Gad and Reuben as their ancestor. But who are these people who are supposed to live amongst Judah and be descended from Simeon and Levi? We know of no such people, just that Simeon and Levi were heroes in the genealogy of Judah, but where exactly they fit in, no one can agree.'

I stopped to draw breath, but was in full flight and so carried on:

'Secondly Zadok wants us to believe that the whole of the people of the land travelled to Egypt, and the whole of the people of the land came back with the tribe of Joseph. But this is absurd, if they had done so, who would there have been to fight with when they returned? No, the truth is that the Joseph tribes alone went to Egypt and returned, when they, and this is a matter of historical record, invaded the land from the east, in concert with the Benjamites.'

Whispers had begun to circulate in the room by now as I continued:

'Finally this tradition of Zadok conveniently ignores those groups in the land who cannot claim to be descended from our Aramaean ancestors. What about the Gibeonites, whom Zadok has effaced by not mentioning them at all? What about the Calebites? Their ancestor is Esau, whom they reckon as a bitter rival of Jacob, so how can you reconcile them with this tradition? and yet ignore them and you ignore half the strength of Judah. And Zadok leaves out of the reckoning ten or twelve groups in the north, and indeed all over the land, that he cannot fit into his scheme. What about the Kenazites, for example? One final point, in the north Zadok puts the province of Asher along the sea-coast, but the coastal-plain was never part of our land, but is inhabited by Phoenicians.'

'Finally, I should like agree with my master Abiathar that I cannot see that this land needs a complete reorganisation. But if it does it should certainly not be based on a synthetic

tradition, dreamt up to try to tidy up an untidy historical record made up of conflicting and contradictory claims. I do not try to glorify this confusion, but it does show that there can be no such detailed and clear-cut narrative of the history of this land, such as Zadok proposes and that, even if there were, it should not be made the basis for any political action over and above the present need for such action.'

I sat down and a hum like a swarm of bees arose. David held up his hand for silence and then motioned to Zadok again. He in turned and motioned to an aide of his, Nathan, a prophet, who rose:

'Our argument is that nothing we do can prosper unless it is established on a divinely-sanctioned basis. Shammah the Scribe ridicules the tradition we have put forward because, as an antiquary, he knows of many conflicting traditions, but should he not rather be seeking to establish what lies behind these traditions? If Abraham is held to have done twenty-five different things on one occasion, by twenty-five different people, it does not mean that he did twenty-five different things, or that there were twenty-five Abrahams. No, on one occasion Abraham will have done one thing, and it is the task of the antiquary to decide which tradition is the most truthful—and this is what we are attempting to do in our researches.'

'Secondly, to answer one or two specific charges that Shammah has laid at our feet: we have placed the Danites in this position on the map, because, although we know that they now live in the far north, beyond the Sea of Chinnereth, they once lived in this area, which they were obliged to quit because of the incursions of the Philistines, and when they had left the Philistines and the Gibeonites took over their land. However as it was El's purpose to have Dan live in this area, then the tribe should be moved back, and the interlopers removed from their territory. As to the question of the sojourn of the people of the land in Egypt, it is unquestionable that all the tribes went down into Egypt, for the tradition of the priests of Shiloh is quite clear on this. In their absence the people of the land who are not chosen by El, some of which you have enumerated, the Calebites, the Kenazites, the Gibeonites and the Philistines, took over the whole of the land, but El gave their inheritance back to the people of the land. The tribe of Joseph may have been the most numerous, but every tribe was represented. If tribes such as Judah forget that once they went to Egypt it is because on settling in the land they intermarried with the people of the land, such as Calebites, and have forgotten their traditions. In the future they must be encouraged to remember their traditions, and to distance themselves from those people who are not amongst El's people; these people should be given the chance to be adopted into one of the tribes, but if they refuse, they must be driven out of the land, for they are not El's people, *we* are El's people.'

'Finally, as to Shammah's refusal to try to say what El's purpose for his people and his land, I believe it to be a denial of El's blessings. For it is incontrovertible that El has

shown more blessings to us than to any other nation we know of. A generation ago we were a poor oppressed people who hardly possessed our own lands in security, now we have a great and glorious monarch, and his Kingdom is, with El's blessing, increasing every day. From this we cannot conclude otherwise than that El has blessed us, that we are his chosen people indeed, and that he is a greater God than any of the gods of the nations roundabout, or of any nation in the world.'

With this he sat down and a renewed buzz of conversation arose. David called on Abiathar to call another speaker and the debate continued. Although another six or seven speakers spoke they simply rehearsed the arguments that I have already set down, so I will not trouble my readers with any more speeches. My readers will understand that there were several things that the speakers on our side wanted to say, but could not, as there are many things that are impossible to say in front of a King, notably that El may well have blessed David and us, but that El's blessings can be withdrawn as easily as they can be granted, and our history bears this out by numerous instances. The only two additional points that arose of any interest were, from Zadok's side, the suggestion that another proof of El's mysterious plan for our nation was that the sacred chest of Shiloh had found its way to Jerusalem, which Zadok's camp now considered to be the mystical capital of Israel, and, from a northern priest of our camp, a useful description of the ethnic state of the far north and a list of twenty or so groups in the north who had suddenly become aliens in their own land by Zadok's new tradition.

Throughout the remaining debate I tried to see what the effect of all these speeches was on the King. But as always he sat without reaction, and in any case the room was arranged so that light fell through windows at the far end, behind the King, and this meant that his face was in shadow for us in the Council. Eventually, as evening was drawing on, and as the speeches were getting longer and longer and emptier and emptier, the King raised his hand and asked the Council to disperse. 'I have heard many difficult and complicated arguments today, and I will consult with members of the Council individually before this matter is raised again,' he added.

As we left the room Abiathar tugged my sleeve and asked me to attend him to his house. We walked in silence through the streets; I had fallen respectfully back two paces, but Abiathar pulled me forward level with him and we walked on abreast. He seemed to begin to speak several times, but it was not until we reached his house, and climbed on to the roof and were served bread and wine, that he eventually spoke:

'You spoke well today, my friend, so did everyone of our persuasion.'

'Thank you,' I replied, 'But how did you think the debate went?'

'We lost.'

‘What?’

‘We lost, because Zadok cleverly did not propose anything. It is obvious even to him that no useful purpose can be served by carving the country up into these new tribal districts, and expelling half the population as non-people. No, and he never intended it to be a serious proposition either. What he has done is to sow in the King’s mind the idea of a sort of spiritual monarchy, with himself as El’s own monarch. And believe me his flattery was directed in exactly the right way, we will see in the future the Zadok will be made much of, and David will do nothing about his plan for the Kingdom, but will begin to think of himself as greater than human, able to do anything.’

‘It’s a shame...’ I began.

‘It’s more than a shame,’ Abiathar suddenly shouted and banged the table, ‘It’s a sin against El, for no man is greater than any other in El’s eyes, whatever power he may grant to this man or that man.’ He had risen to his feet, but sat down again.

‘David will do nothing, he is not inclined to much hard work, as you may have noticed, but he will become more and more puffed up with pride and where that will lead us, I do not know. We will not see the worst of it in this reign, but when a son of his succeeds, I don’t doubt that Zadok will be at his right hand, dictating policy.’

There seemed nothing for me to say, so I took a drink from my cup. Abiathar continued:

‘I always suspected that something like this would happen. Our problem is that El has always been too close to us; in other nations the great gods are concerned only with the nation and the King, and the lesser gods with less important people. If you have a religious dispensation like ours where everyone’s God is also the nation’s God, and the nation then becomes great, it leads to spiritual pride and just the sort of nonsense we have been hearing this afternoon. Whenever you hear anyone protesting too loudly or too long about the greatness of their God, then you can be sure that what they’re actually talking about is the greatness of themselves.’

‘Is there,’ I asked, after a silence, ‘Anything we can do?’

‘I think what we must do is to convene a meeting of like-minded clerics, I’ll ask you to draw up a list tomorrow and send the letters out. I’ll listen to what they have to say, but I shall be proposing two things, firstly that everyone dig up everything they can to the discredit of Zadok’s new tradition, any belief they can find that contradicts it or obscures it. Secondly that we make much more of the Lady Asherah. If we can begin to separate El from the personal affairs of men, and make him into the distant God of our nation, then in time to come when our nation is no more, for no nation lasts for ever, then perhaps she may continue to inspire religious-feeling and righteousness amongst the people of the land.’

We talked more of this for a long time and it was nearly dawn before I returned home.

## X

### A House Divided

There were several results from the Council meeting I described the last chapter. The first was the polarisation of the King's Council into the two factions I have already noted. The second was that in priestly circles two camps also emerged. Zadok and his supporters had control of the temple in Jerusalem, and, as David did indeed, as Abiathar predicted, begin to make much of him and his followers, the temple liturgy and much of its teaching began to be altered more and more to reflect Zadok's new tradition, which, by the by, was successively refined as new pieces of the tradition were discovered. For example they revived the idea of the secret, and thus more holy, name of El, thus implying that the god worshipped as El elsewhere was somehow not their El. On the other hand Abiathar had much influence in the land apart from Jerusalem and on his recommendation the priests of the various centres began to alter their teachings and liturgies in opposition to the Jerusalem temple's teaching. In particular they began to emphasise more and more Lady Asherah, and her son Baal in those places where he had been worshipped before. The shrine of Shechem, however, would have neither of these new versions of traditional religion, and, despite the fact that Zadok made great efforts to win over his home-shrine, they persisted in their worship of the Golden Bull of Shechem, the Bull of Israel.

Another result, however, was more direct, and more disastrous. For a week after the conference the people who attended to David in the palace had been reporting that he was a changed man, he had a strange glint in his eye, he was distracted and angry, then calm and elated. One evening as the King was walking on the roof of the palace in the cool of the evening, for it was the hottest season of the year, he chanced to see a young woman bathing in the courtyard of a nearby house. He was instantly smitten with lust for her, and he descended into the palace to inquire who she was. He was told she was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of David's 'Thirty Chief Men', who at that time was away at the siege of Rammah. The next day, in the afternoon, David summoned Bathsheba and, when she came into his presence, he dismissed all the attendants and raped her.

News quickly spread around palace, for, as I said before, nothing can happen in secret in a palace. Not that Bathsheba put up any resistance, or protested, but then no one can deny a king anything, whether they like it or not. The whole palace, the whole city, and the whole country, when they got to hear the news, was shocked, more than shocked in fact. Unfortunately with us, as I suppose with all nations, men will often use their superior



strength to overcome a woman's resistance. But such conduct is not expected of a king, least of all El's Anointed, though kings have more opportunity than any other for such crimes. We know of nothing of such a nature that was done by any of the judges of former times, except the wicked Abimilech of Shechem, who did try to make himself King.

But worse was to come, David had sent Bathsheba back to her house that day, but a few weeks later she sent word to the King that she was pregnant. David sent for Uriah, on some pretext or other, meaning to see that he slept with his wife whilst he was at Jerusalem so that David's paternity of her child could be concealed. But Uriah was a very religious man and as he was still on active duty he did not return to his house and sleep with his wife, but took a billet in the guest-house of the palace. When David saw this he invited Uriah to dine with him and got him very drunk, but still he staggered off to the guest-rooms, instead of to his own house. So David sent him back to the siege of Rammah with a sealed letter to Joab telling him to send Uriah into the thickest part of the fighting and to make sure that he was killed. Joab did this, sending him with a company against the part of the fortification that were the most heavily guarded and then ordering a sudden retreat, so that he was cut off, and killed.

When news reached the court Bathsheba mourned for her husband, and then when the period of mourning was over David took her into the palace and married her. And in due course she bore David's son.

When we in the court witnessed the successive stages of this story unfold our grief increased. For if David was wrong to rape Bathsheba, he was doubly wrong to have her husband killed. Something died within me at that time, as I know with many others of a like mind, as, for example, my master Abiathar, and everything that has happened since has seemed to be a sort of waking nightmare. I hope that none of my readers has ever experienced this mental state, and I would not labour it if it had only been my own private opinion, but, as I say, many others shared it. It seemed to us that the promise that David's career and his ascent to the throne had shown was suddenly and cruelly cut away. And in this narrative I have tried to give an impression of what this disappointment felt like, for in the earlier parts I have given a very bright picture of David, and in the latter half, my description suddenly darkens, though perhaps a little too abruptly for those readers who do not know the full story of David's reign already.

But I am sure that this experience of ours, how David's reign at once lost all its lustre and turned dark, was parallel to how the King himself felt about his own career. For, as I said before, when Samuel had chosen David it was because he saw in him the right kind of ambition to drive David to take the throne of the whole land. But this David had achieved, so by the age of thirty he was King in Hebron, by the time he was thirty-five he was King in

Jerusalem, and by the time he was forty his generals had conquered a large empire for him. And after this, I believe he really did not see anything further to do, and indeed, after this time, he really did not do anything else, but trusted to his generals to administer military affairs and delegated all his other duties to other court functionaries. And yet there was within him still a burning ambition, one that was only exacerbated by Zadok's talk of the divine nature of his Kingdom, and his El-given mandate.

After David's child was born it proved to be a sickly one and it seemed likely that it would die. David was plunged into gloom and Zadok, probably recognising that he was in part to blame for David's actions, sent Nathan the prophet to speak with him. When Nathan arrived David was sitting morosely in his chamber watching the flies circling. He knew exactly what Nathan was about to say to him, but prophets are always allowed to speak their prophecies, and so Nathan began, and told him a fable about how there was once a rich man with large flocks and a poor man who had one lamb. The rich man, when guests arrived, instead of killing one of his own flock, sent to the poor man and ordered him to deliver up his lamb. This he did, but he made so much protest in the neighbourhood that the rich man was forced to cover up his actions by having the poor man murdered. David knew that this was a parallel with his actions and so said nothing. Nathan continued:

'Thus says El: because you have done evil the sword will never depart from your house. The child you have begotten will die because of your sins and one of your own house will rise up against you. But I shall preserve you in your Kingship nonetheless.'

David was immediately smitten with remorse and grief and went to the temple and fasted before the altar, asking El to kill him instead of the child and he did not eat for seven days. But on the seventh day the child died and everyone was afraid to tell David. When David saw his servants were in a nervous state he asked: 'Is the child dead?' and they told him it was. And he rose up and took food and washed and returned to the palace. When his servants wondered at this David said: 'While the child lived I wept and did not eat, thinking that perhaps El would save the child. But now he is dead nothing I do will bring him back again.'

After this David slept with Bathsheba again and she conceived another child and when he was born he was named Solomon. David continued on friendly terms with Bathsheba, better terms than with any of his other wives, and she never gave any sign of bearing him any resentment, but, if the gossip of the palace is to be trusted, they never slept together again. David was cheered out of his despondency by the birth of Solomon, who was a healthy child, but the melancholy that I mentioned before had set about him and, unlike Saul's madness, this was not a frenzy that came and went, but a settled darkness that made him as time went on eat little, exercise not at all, hardly go out, or take pleasure in anything,

and made him completely inactive. His only interest was now in religion and he had Zadok and members of his faction about him constantly. The priesthood of Jerusalem was greatly favoured by him and almost the only thing he occupied his mind with was how to increase their power and prestige. Although Abiathar and his faction were not publicly slighted, and Abiathar was still received, David increased the powers of the Jerusalem clergy throughout the land, over and above those of the local shrines, and he appointed officers to collect revenue to send to the temple in Jerusalem—this was the closest he ever came to a general taxation. He was also deeply interested in the temple liturgy and had many new religious songs composed, mostly of a penitential nature, wherein his own remorse was figured as that of the nation bewailing its sins. And finally he occupied himself with plans for a grandiose new temple of El in Jerusalem, but Zadok had told him that only his son could actually build it, so the plans remained plans and David had to content himself with stock-piling materials for the project.

My master Abiathar disapproved of David's new religiosity, and although this was partly motivated by the fact that his own faction was made of less importance by this change on the King's part he did make three very valid points about David's sins. Firstly he said that those who enjoy El's blessing should be joyful and not fearful and penitent, and so he objected to the tone of the new temple service as too gloomy. Secondly he said that Zadok and the others were pandering to David's sense of self-importance, first they told him that he was uniquely favoured by El, then they told that he was the greatest of sinners, whereas, Abiathar argued many people had been just as favoured, and many have been much greater sinners. Finally, Abiathar observed, David was right to try to atone for his crimes to El, as his actions broke at least two of El's rules, those prohibiting murder and adultery, and probably also that prohibiting theft, since he had stolen Bathsheba's honour, her integrity and her peace of mind. But, added Abiathar, El alone could not forgive David his crime, for Asherah has control of women's affairs and takes control also of crimes committed against women. So David should have applied himself to her too.

David was now in his mid forties, but looked much older, and from time to time his melancholy broke out in a physical form, that of an unsightly and painful skin-disease. His enemies whispered that this was leprosy, but it was not, since it came and went. But as he was so inactive and so sick questions began to be asked about the succession to the throne. Now David had two sons who were approaching manhood, the eldest, by Ahinoam of Jezreel, was Amnon, and the younger was Absalom, the son of Maacah, the daughter of Talmai, King of Geshur, one of the Aramaean kingdoms to the east. Abigail had had a son, but he had died in infancy. Amnon it is fair to say was a lout. He had inherited none of his father's abilities or good qualities, but was wrathful, proud, ignorant and stupid, and spent his time longing

around the palace with his equally obnoxious acquaintances, who mostly came from David's chariot squadron.

Amnon would probably not have turned into such an unpleasant character had his childhood been more settled, but he had been born at Ziklag, and then David moved to Hebron, and then to Jerusalem and each time the household was in upheaval for months before and after each move and his education was neglected. Moreover, early on David had paid little attention to his son, in fact he had little time to do so, and his mother had spoiled him. When, finally he was put under good tutors, such as my master Abiathar, it was too late and he was incorrigible. David took more care with Absalom and everyone agreed that this young man inherited all David good qualities and handsome features; he inherited everything, in short, that Amnon did not. Incidentally one of the most interesting features of the transition from a society rule by judges and elders, to a monarchy, is how much more important very young men have become. Saul was forty before he was made King, and most judges did not attain their full responsibilities until at least middle age. But with the wars and emergencies of the more recent period very young men have, like David, had an opportunity to distinguish themselves, and grey-beards, instead of being revered, are now derided. In this case the absurdity of the situation I am describing, where so much attention was paid, because of the Kings' infirmity, to two youths still in their teens, is quite remarkable.

Anyway David's rape of Bathsheba had a very bad effect on Amnon and, if it seemed to unhinge David's mind, it completely turned Amnon's wits. He used to go around in a frenzy of excitement, thinking that, as he was the King's eldest son, then all the women in the palace were at his disposal, and the maidservants were hardly safe from being molested by him for months afterwards. However the crime that Amnon did eventually commit was so horrible that an additional explanation is required and I believe that I know what the correct one is, though I have not heard it published before. A friend of mine, Ashan, the court librarian, was astonished one day when Amnon entered the library, and demanded that Ashan read to him books about the monarchies of other countries. Someone, I think, had told him that he ought to find about kingly duties, as he would be King one day. Unfortunately Ashan began to read to him from a popular encyclopaedia of the nations, beginning with a description of Egypt and the customs of the pharaohs. He had not got very far before the author mentioned the well-known fact that pharaohs demonstrate their royal nature by marrying their sisters or half-sisters. At this Amnon's eyes lit up and he left soon afterwards in state of great agitation.

After this Amnon became obsessed with his half-sister Tamar, the sister of Absalom, a most beautiful young woman, and at this time about fifteen years old, but she would have nothing to do with him and used to hide away in the women's quarters in the palace, where

Amnon was not permitted to go. Amnon was so obsessed that he began to become ill and it was then that a friend of his suggested that he feign serious illness so as to get Tamar to come to him. This he did and when David came to visit his son, Amnon asked his father to ask Tamar to come to him and bake him some special cakes, one of his favourite foods. This Tamar did, but Amnon refused to eat until all the attendants had been dismissed, and when he had got Tamar on her own he told her that he loved her and that they should sleep together. Tamar refused, but Amnon was insistent, and in the end he raped her with as little compunction as David had had when he raped Bathsheba. And as soon as he had done, he suddenly, in misplaced remorse perhaps, felt an enormous hatred of Tamar and had her thrown out of his presence. She put on mourning and went to her brother Absalom and dwelt with him in his apartments, another desolate widow amongst the other women of David's household.

David was horrified at Amnon's act, and so was everyone, but there was nothing he could do that would not make the situation worse, though he decided there and then that Amnon should never inherit the Kingdom, though I doubt he would have done anyway. Absalom, however, plotted revenge, though he was careful to act towards Amnon as if nothing had happened. Amnon, for his part, was sobered by the crime and began to behave in a way that was, for him at any rate, sensible and moderate, though he also avoided Absalom as much as he could.

After two years had gone by Absalom held a feast at the time of the Spring Festival in Ephraim. He invited all the children of the King, and David himself. Amnon refused, claiming other commitments, and David also could not come, but Absalom went to his father and asked that, if he could not come, that he make Absalom come, which David did. When he arrived at the feast Amnon was wary and suspicious, but Absalom soon disarmed him with his charm, another character he had inherited from David, and Amnon quickly got very drunk. Absalom then ordered his men to kill him, which they did.

At first wild rumours reached Jerusalem that Absalom had had all the children of David killed, but soon better information arrived along with David's other sons, all of whom were still alive. Absalom, meanwhile fled to his grandfather Talmai the King of Geshur, and stayed at his court. And David mourned for Absalom, because he loved him, and because he admired the way he had taken revenge for the rape of Tamar. Nevertheless he could not send to have him return immediately. He did not mourn for Amnon at all, nor did anyone else.

After a while Joab, seeing the King full of sadness for Absalom, for at this time David's original melancholy became focussed on his absent son, decided to let him know that he thought it was politically acceptable to have Amnon return. He sent a woman of Tekoa, a town near David's birthplace, to petition him, knowing that David had a soft spot for Judites

and would let her talk with him at length. She told him that she was a widow with two sons, one of whom had killed the other and now the killer was in danger of being executed too, thus leaving her with no sons at all. David immediately saw through this story and demanded to know whether Joab had sent her to him, and when she said that he had, he called Joab to him and sent him off to Geshur to bring Absalom home.

Nevertheless, when Absalom returned he was not received at court for two years and began to chafe at this political isolation. So he sent for Joab, but Joab refused to come. He sent again and again Joab refused to come. Finally Absalom ordered his servants to set fire to a field of ripe barley belonging to Joab just outside the city walls, and at this Joab, who, like David, was very concerned about his own fields and property, came running in a fury to Absalom, demanding to know what he thought he was doing. Absalom laughed and told him not to mind about the barley, but to ask the King to receive him again, otherwise he would return to Geshur. Joab, abashed, did so, and the King received Absalom and forgave him.

However Absalom was an ambitious young man, very like his father in fact, and decided that he could not wait for his father to die, as, despite his infirmities, it looked as if David would still live out his span of days, even if as a valetudinarian. Absalom began to contact all those in the Kingdom who were discontented and to ride around in great state, almost as if he was King already. And, remarkably, even though David was such a mild King and despite the fact that few could have any reason to feel dissatisfied with him, he began to find supporters. For you must realise that all the crimes and unhappiness that I have been narrating applied only to the court; as far as anyone outside Jerusalem knew David's rule was a good one, and good because mild. In fact if any people have a King who hardly ever stirs outside the palace and does nothing from one week's end to the next, in most cases they should count their blessings. In Judah Absalom found much support because he flattered the feelings of the Elders of Judah that Judah had been slighted when David moved the capital to Jerusalem! This was the reward David had for allowing the Elders to continue all their privileges and traditional procedures.

On the other hand Absalom very cleverly exploited the genuine grievance of Israel, that David was lax in administering justice and government. For he used to stand outside the northern gate of Jerusalem and quiz all the people coming in, and if he found anyone with a grievance or law-suit he would condole with them, telling them that David did not do enough to settle such disputes and confusion and that, were he King, he would see to it that such affairs were put in order. He also flattered any litigants by telling them that their cases were watertight. By this he gathered much support, though I doubt if any of the litigants paused to consider that if, the next day, or an hour later, Absalom had come across their opponents, he would have declared their case watertight too. Another clever thing that Absalom did was to

insinuate that the trial census that had just taken place was secretly to be used as a justification for a general taxation in the future.

Finally Absalom thought he had everything prepared and begged leave of the King to go to Hebron to make a special sacrifice. David let him go and he went taking two hundred of the court, most of whom did not know of the conspiracy, but whom Absalom wanted to compromise and thus force into supporting him. He also took a councillor whom he trusted greatly, Ahithopel, who, ever since his granddaughter Bathsheba was raped by David, had been secretly opposed to him. And at Hebron Absalom declared himself King and all of Judah and all of Israel went over to him. At Jerusalem David's councillors were divided. Some wanted to stay and defend the city, which had very strong walls. But David declared that everyone must flee. There were two reasons for this, in moving his entire household away from Jerusalem David could find out who was loyal and who was not, for it was impossible to know whom Absalom had corrupted in the court, and secondly as Absalom was David's son in temperament, David understood that he would be ruthless and swift in his actions.

So it came about that the whole court was shifted, the place of exile being decided upon as the area of Israel across the Jordan, where most of David's regular army was stationed, and so all the wives, and all the servants and all the soldiers and all the councillors packed quickly and left and at the gates to the city David held a formal ceremony whereby each group of his court renewed their allegiance to him and set off in the direction of flight, after having been given a chance to go off unmolested and join Absalom. One surprising thing that David discovered here was that Absalom had hardly made any overtures at all to the army, as he might have expected to have done, for all units remained loyal and volunteered to follow David wherever he went. However David ordered that Abiathar and Zadok, and another councillor of his, Hushai, stay put in Jerusalem and give an appearance of cooperating with the new regime, but secretly reporting to him. I myself was in the far north of the country at the time, having been sent on an errand to Tyre by Abiathar and only rejoined the court after the whole business was over.

As David and his court were moving eastwards, towards the Jordan two incidents occurred which recalled events of the past, and of the fate of the house of Saul. Firstly Ziba, the man whom David had put in charge of the estates that he had granted to Meribaal, Saul's grandson, came up to meet him with provisions, and when David thanked him and asked where Meribaal was Ziba reported that he had stayed in Jerusalem, expecting Israel to ask him to be King. At this David told Ziba that he could have all the estates that he had granted to Meribaal. Later in the day a rabble of Benjamites, headed by one Shimei, appeared by the road, taunting David and his entourage, for David was travelling in one small party with his

guards, the rest of the court having gone on ahead. Shimei was a supporter of the house of Saul and the reproaches he hurled at David included the charge that as he had allowed Saul's family to be wiped out, so his own family would be exterminated. Abishai, who was with the king, wanted to go and cut off the head of Shimei and disperse his followers, but David, sunk in gloom, would not let him, and so they rode on, the Benjamites following them through fields and over hills parallel to the road, continuing their taunts, until night fell.

The very day that David left Jerusalem Absalom entered the city. And there he met with Hushai, who pretended to come over to him. Absalom held a Council and Ahithopel gave him one very bad piece of advice and one very good one. The good advice was that he should take all the soldiers that could be scraped together and ride as fast as he could after David, to take his party by surprise as it camped that night and to kill the King, so that no one would have any option but to follow Absalom. But Hushai rejected this excellent plan, which would have succeeded because the King was with a small guard and his party was so dispirited that they even neglected to put out sentries that night, but just lay about in the fields where they were camped, without even bothering to light fires, for it was the warmest time of the year. Hushai argued, however, that David had probably already planned an ambush, that it was vital that Absalom's new regime did not suffer a defeat at once, and that it was better to wait until all the levies of Israel and Judah could be gathered together (as though these levies would be any match for the whole of David's professional army, returned from Ammon, Moab and Aram!). Unfortunately for him Absalom preferred Hushai's counsel and, just as unfortunately he also took Ahithopel's bad advice, which was the next day to mount a symbolic display of his assumption of royal authority by taking over David's concubines.

'Taking over' is of course a euphemism, he was to have sex with them in tent pitched on the palace roof; but only a few maid-servants could be found in the palace, as David had taken all his household with him, and everyone knew that these were not David's concubines. Nonetheless they were forced into the tent and Absalom entered with them; in fact nothing happened, Absalom sat glowering at one end of the tent, and the maids sat at the other in a nervous huddle. After an hour or so Absalom emerged to general acclamations from his followers, but the whole city was disgusted with this performance, the like of which had never been seen in the land before; nor would they have been any less disgusted if they had learned that Absalom had not had sex with the maid-servants. Indeed a saying went around immediately that Saul had been made King because of his brawn, David because of his brains, but Absalom because of his prick—I hesitate to report such a low saying, but it sums up the feeling that arose at once in Jerusalem and elsewhere about the new King.



When Ahimilech saw, firstly that he had misjudged the people in advising Absalom to take over his father's concubines, and secondly that his excellent military advice had been ignored he left Jerusalem, travelled to his home-town, set his affairs in order and then hanged himself.

The few days after Absalom's entry into Jerusalem news reached the city that David and his court had reached Mahanaim in the Trans-Jordan, the same city that Abner had used for his capital, and had met up with all units of David's army from the north and east. Unlike Israel and Judah, the Trans-Jordan was still behind David, as was indicated by the cordial reception accorded David by Shobi, the brother of Hanun, the last King of Ammon, whom David had made Governor, and Machir and Barzillai, two of the most prominent men of the region. It was then decided by Absalom's Council that the best response was to march north, through Benjamin and Ephraim, collecting levies as they went, until they had passed through Shechem, and then to turn east and cross the Jordan and come upon Mahanaim from the north. This plan was betrayed by Hushai to Zadok and Abiathar, who, for the moment were colleagues in adversity, hiding up in the temple precincts. The priests had David's cousin Jonathan and Zadok's son Ahimaaz waiting in a house outside the city walls to take a message to David and they sent a maid-servant with the message. But the maid was followed and the two messengers were pursued, so they ran into the courtyard of a nearby house whose owner was of David's faction and climbed down the well. A female servant spread a mat over the mouth of the well and scattered dust on it and when, a few minutes later, soldiers entered, nothing could be found. After the soldiers had left, the woman lifted the mat and the men climbed out and went on their way to Mahanaim.

The plan that Absalom and his Council devised was a good one, had it not been for the fact that it was betrayed, and for the fact that the levies they mustered were raw recruits, not professional soldiers like David's troops. But the plan was ingenious because north-west of Mahanaim was a large tract of wooded country, known as the Forest of Ephraim and had David not know what to expect, no one could have anticipated an attack from that quarter, from out of a pathless wilderness. However, as it was, when, several weeks later, Absalom led his new army across the Jordan, and through the forest, David's army was lying in wait in three sections. One was under the command of Joab, one under Abishai and one under Ittai the Gittite. They were divided thus since it was not known exactly where Absalom's army would emerge. As it happened it came out into the open to find Joab's army waiting for it and after a brief battle the levies broke and ran back into the forest in utter confusion.

David had given strict instructions that Absalom was to be taken alive if possible, and also that as this was a battle against their own countrymen, that once the rebels had been defeated, his troops were not to pursue them. And so it was that although many of Absalom's

forces succumbed to exposure, or to bears or wolves or lions, in the forest, most escaped home back across the Jordan. Absalom also made a break for the Jordan on a mule, but as he was riding at full speed through the forest he hit his head on a low branch and was knocked off. A little while later some of David's soldiers found the body and reported it to Joab, who was only a few hundred yards behind. Now whether Absalom had dashed his brains out and was already dead, or whether he was only concussed, and still breathing, is disputed, I have heard both stories. Joab, however, went up to the body and ran it through with a spear and ordered him to be buried at that very spot. His soldiers, recalled from pursuit, soon heaped a large cairn of stones over Absalom's body and then received the order to return to Mahanaim, along with the other two sections of the army.

Joab, however, wanted to send a messenger who would arrive that day with the news and sent a Cushite, a servant of his and a very fast runner, but Ahimaaz, jealous of the honour, for he was a fast runner too, ran off after him. And the Cushite took the same route that David's army had taken a few days before, which was over the hills, but Ahimaaz knew a quicker way which was all downhill and so arrived first.

Back at Mahanaim David was sitting on the top of the tower above the gate, waiting for news of the battle. He saw a lone runner in the distance, and turned to the watchman, remarking that a lone runner must mean good news, for if his army had been defeated he would have seen many men running in confusion all at once. And the watchman then saw another runner, and the two men watched these two approaching, separated by perhaps a mile. Ahimaaz entered first and was brought up to the King, and he collapsed breathlessly at his feet and when asked what news, he told the King:

'All is well, our forces have prevailed.'

But when the King asked him about Absalom he was too fearful to make any reply. Just then the Cushite was brought in and he reported the death of Absalom. David was greatly moved and went into the chamber above the gate and wept and said:

'Oh my son Absalom, Absalom, my son, I wish I died instead of you, oh Absalom, Absalom, my son.'

And when he recovered a little he ordered a general mourning, so that the next day, when Joab and the other commanders reached the city, instead of celebration and thanksgivings they met with expressions of grief and sorrow. This angered Joab so much that for once he forgot himself and when introduced in to the presence of the grief-stricken King said:

'I see that you love your enemies and hate your friends. If Absalom had killed me yesterday you would have been pleased, no doubt, as pleased as if he had captured you and your court and all your children and your women. Unless you recover yourself and show some fortitude the people will think their King is weak and decrepit and unworthy to rule.'

David took notice of the rebuke and at once stopped grieving outwardly and ordered the usual celebrations and thanksgiving for the victory.

After this victory David and his councillors began to send to the Elders of Judah, thinking that they were more likely to accept David again immediately than Israel was. And indeed they indicated that they would have David back immediately, were it not for the remainder of Absalom's forces, who were still occupying Jerusalem, under the command of Amasa. Amasa was a cousin of Absalom's, a nephew of David's, whom Absalom had give command in imitation of Joab's appointment by David. David treated behind Joab's back with Amasa, and promised not to persecute him and indeed to leave him in his command and to incorporate his units into the regular army. After this the King and his court set off once more for Jerusalem and were received again into the city and David resumed his rule.

However, Israel was still unsettled, most of the people wanted David for King again, but some hankered after independence. And one Sheba, a Benjamite, raised rebellion with the slogan:

'What is the house of David to us?

Israel, take to your tents!

An allusion to the days when Ephraim and Manasseh had lived in the wilderness, before entering the land. David at once ordered the army into the north and Joab marched off, seething against David and his secret understanding with Amasa. David had also ordered Amasa to join Joab with his men before he set off, but he had not shown up. Eventually he caught up with Joab at Gibeon, and when he went to meet Joab, Joab suddenly stabbed him in the stomach, just as he had suddenly murdered Abner fifteen years before, and for much the same reasons. He did present all sorts of evidence to David on his return that Amasa was plotting with Sheba to come over to him and share the Kingdom with him; Sheba in the north, Amasa in Judah. But my own feeling is that Amasa was simply a fairly incompetent young man with delusions of grandeur, who had no aptitude to serve his ambition. And to get on the wrong side of an old lion like Joab was the height of his folly.

The northern rebellion was easily crushed; Joab pursued Sheba all the way up to the far north of the land, as no one would stand with him and fight. And eventually, when he had holed himself up in the city of Abel, Joab bribed the city elders to kill him and deliver the body up. And so the north returned to David.

## XI

### The Last Days of King David

After Absalom's revolt David took no revenge at all on anyone who had joined his son. Apart from Amasa no one suffered for the revolt, except for the unfortunate Ephraimites who died in the Battle of the Forest, or in its aftermath. Even before David and his court had crossed the Jordan, Shimei and the Benjamites, who had mocked and cursed him when he went into exile, came to him and fell at his feet and begged for mercy. David let the Benjamites go, as clearly Shimei was the main agitator amongst them; Abishai was all for putting him to death, but David pardoned him, promising him his life. Back at Jerusalem Meribaal, Saul's grandson, appeared and greeted David. David asked him why he had not accompanied him into exile and Meribaal explained that Ziba had taken away all his servants, and had left without giving him a chance to come with him, and, as he was crippled in his legs, he was forced to stay in his house. His neglected and dishevelled appearance bore out his story, and David was ashamed that he had so quickly given judgment in favour of Ziba before. Nevertheless he could not trouble himself to make any further enquiries, and said, lamely: 'Let you and Ziba divide the lands between you.' Meribaal at this summoned up all the dignity that he could and said: 'Let Ziba keep everything' and left. He left Jerusalem the next day and returned to the place he had been hiding before David sought him out, and lived in poverty for a while, until he died. And anyone in the court with any decency left mourned the last of Saul's family, and thought that David had hardly repaid the kindness that Jonathan, Meribaal's father, had shown him.

Nor must I omit the fate of the maid-servants whom Absalom had pretended to have sex with on the roof of the palace. It seemed to everybody that the best course would be to find these unfortunate women husbands, to recompense them for the loss of their honour, especially as they had never been concubines of David's anyway. But David gave orders that they live in the women's quarters in the palace for the rest of their lives, where they joined all the other unhappy women.

David lived another four years after Absalom's revolt, but his melancholy increased and, after the excitement of the revolt had died down and everything necessary had been done to restore normality, he grew increasingly lethargic and finally, towards the end, never left his chambers. Thus the only events that took place in this period were those caused by the jockeying for influence at the court of his successor. It seemed that the only candidate left for the succession was Adonijah, David's fourth son, and now in his late teens. There were other

sons, but they were still children. Adonijah was a likeable enough man, he was midway between Amnon and Absalom in his disposition and looks. He was not vicious and stupid like Amnon, but not ambitious and proud, like Absalom. He was moderately good-looking. But like his two brothers he also seems not to have inherited his father's caution. Perhaps because all were born into a royal household, all three lacked any sense that they had to do things for themselves. Amnon had assumed that he was going to be King, no matter how unkingly his behaviour; Absalom had planned a revolt over several years, but had not thought it worthwhile to cultivate the army, assuming that they would desert David and come over to him as soon as he declared himself. And Adonijah assumed that the way was now clear for him to succeed to the throne without his having to do anything. The fact that he was easy-going and good-natured and had no enemies also seemed to be in his favour.

Politically this time was characterised by the demise of the Traditionalists; although nothing was done about changing the way the Kingdom was governed, and although mildness was still the official policy, and although it was mainly Absalom, not the previous policies, that had caused the revolt, the Monarchists were in the ascendancy. My master Abiathar was rarely at court these days, but was in semi-retirement. As I was employed by him I too spent less time at the court than before, but travelled round the country and outside it on his business, both private and priestly. It was at this time that I began to think of writing this history, and to gather materials for it.

On his return from the Trans-Jordan David had brought several leading men with him to court, perhaps he thought that he could better trust them than some of his other councillors. Notable amongst these was Chimham, the son of Barzillai. These politicians made a common cause with Zadok and the Monarchists, and they began to squeeze out of official positions anyone who had shown themselves to be friendly with our faction. Thus, for example, my friend Ashan, the court librarian, was dismissed, and in the royal library and other archives in the city, where their power extended, the Monarchists began to edit and select documents to back up their case, and to remove other documents that did not support their ideas. This was one of the reasons why I decided to begin gathering materials for this history, so as to save, before it was too late, material that supported the Traditionalist interpretation of David's reign. Indeed with hindsight it was foolish of us to feel aggrieved at these developments, we had simply been lucky that the first part of David's reign had allowed for so much openness in council. What was happening then was simply that the regime was moving towards the normal conditions of a monarchy.

Zadok was now all-powerful, as David was taking so little interest in affairs that he even began to depute for him at Council meetings and in audiences. David was not only lethargic and apathetic, he was also suffering from a religious melancholy and all his morbid

interest in religious affairs that I described in an earlier chapter had only increased. It was then that Zadok conceived a bold plan, though you must understand that it was not known about or widely suspected until it actually came into effect. Zadok was once quite confident that he could control Adonijah as King, but the youth was now nearly an adult and had begun to show some signs of independence, moreover he seemed completely uninterested in either religion or warfare, the two pillars of the Monarchist ideology, and, his greatest mistake, he made no attempt to court the Monarchist politicians. Zadok looked around at the other sons of David, and saw that none of them had been educated at court, as it was never anticipated that any of them would inherit the throne. However, David's son by Bathsheba, Solomon, was living at court, and although he was only ten years old, he was already showing signs of great promise and a royal nature. Zadok began to sound Bathsheba as to her views and she became an ally of his; he then began very subtly to court the army and all the important people about court as to the desirability of having a sound successor to David. He also began to recur more and more in his conversations with David to David's great sin, and to hint that to allow Solomon to succeed, not Adonijah, would not only atone for this sin, but would continue the glorious, divinely-favoured monarchy that he was the founder of. Whether David agonised over this, or whether by now he was too weak and ill to consider anything I cannot say, as now I was not a resident at court and had no access to any gossip, and besides the matter was so secret that no one, besides Zadok and his trusted friends, and Bathsheba and David, knew about it.

The King was by now very feeble and bed-ridden and besides his skin-disease, which was constant now, he had a most peculiar affliction, that, no matter how hot the season, he could never get warm. Bathsheba, who by now had taken over the nursing of him, appointed a young woman to sleep with him, to keep him warm—her name was Abishag the Shunemite. No one commented on this, but I cannot help feeling that a good fire and some thick feather quilts would have been much more effective. I believe that Bathsheba appointed Abishag, who, by the by, was very beautiful, as a revenge for David's rape of her—he was by now feeble and impotent and so his beautiful bed-fellow could only mock his former lust.

Finally everyone knew that the King was dying. There is a great mystique about the dying and no doubt my readers will expect from me some sort of triumphant death-bed speech, or some harrowing reconciliation with someone or other. But I believe that most people of a good age die of some sort of wasting illness, and their faculties have been progressively decaying for some time, so that towards the end their wits and memory are quite gone and that the time of the death could easily come a week earlier or a week later and it would make little difference. Nor did David give an indications of reliving or making

judgements on his career, the truth is that he was simply tired of life and towards the end he grew more peaceful at the imminent prospect of death, but that is all.

As the court was convinced that Adonijah was to succeed his friends grew more and more elated as the King sank. One day Adonijah, who had been travelling around in a greater and greater state as his father grew weaker and weaker, decided to throw a huge banquet and to invite all his friends and all the court. Everyone came except Zadok and a few of his advisers; principal guests were Joab, for the old warrior had become one of Adonijah's best friends, and Abiathar. I was rather surprised that my master should go to such a tasteless event, but I think he was so relieved at the prospect of a new King who would not be so under that thumb of Zadok that his natural good sense deserted him.

Back at the palace Zadok and his friends grew alarmed, because the natural culmination of such a banquet would be to have Adonijah declared King, for it is not unheard of for a King to declare his son King in his lifetime, and even a dutiful son can anticipate the wishes of a dying King. However their plans were almost complete and had to advanced by only a few days. Solomon, who was twelve years old at the time, was brought out of the palace and taken, on mule -back, to the pool of Gihon, near the city, and Zadok and Nathan the prophet anointed him King, to general acclamations from a hired audience. He was then taken back up to the palace where, amidst detachments from the whole army, whom Zadok had ordered up from the Trans-Jordan a few weeks before, he was proclaimed King, and the whole city and the Elders of Judah were called to do homage to him.

When news of this reached Adonijah's banquet everyone was thunderstruck, but the other faction had pre-empted them, and as they had the support of the whole army, there was nothing that anyone, not even Joab, could do. After a moment or two everyone began racing for the doors to be the first to reach the palace to do homage to the new King. Adonijah, on the other hand, fled to the temple to seek sanctuary.

And so Solomon became King and a few days later news came that David had died after having blessed his son and delivered to him a long and thoughtful piece of advice on kingly duties, which was duly published and distributed. No one asked how a man who had scarcely spoken for months could have delivered such a speech and no one questioned the official story of his death, which was that he rose to go out into his garden and fell down a short flight of stairs and died. Yet he had been bed-ridden for months, and if the new King had wanted to remove his father lest he revive and reinstate Adonijah, as may well have happened, why the need for such an elaborate story when he could easily have been helped on way with poison, or by being smothered. I am afraid I can offer no explanation for this, for, as I said, I had no access to palace gossip by this time, and thus my readers will have to be content that the life of David ended with a mystery.

But before I go on to narrate, by way of a final chapter, the nature of Solomon's rule and what happened to the principal actors in the story, I will sum up, as best I can, David's life. In fact acute readers will already have assembled my interpretation from passages scattered throughout the foregoing account, and in any case my readers should remember that if they were to read an account of David written by one of Zadok's partisans, or a supporter of the house of Saul, if there are any of these left, that account, whilst in the main relating the same facts, would differ completely in its interpretation. Indeed it may be that this summary is entirely futile, as the political position it is written from has become almost obsolete. For no one living now can really remember the days before there were the kings in the land. I am now old and grey-haired, and I can only just remember the time before Samuel made Saul King, and no one can pretend allegiance to institutions, such as that of the office of judge, which have been in abeyance for so long.

Be that as it may, my judgement was that David was a brilliant military commander, an outstanding politician, a bad King, but a weak, not really a bad, man.

To treat these judgements in turn: there was no one in the land other than David who realised that the only way to defeat the Philistines was to wage an economic, guerilla war on them, which, over a number of years, reduced their strength so that Saul and David could meet them on equal terms. And the best commander of the period apart from David, namely Abner, showed his appreciation of this originality of thought by copying David's strategy and tactics at once, as soon as he saw how effective they were. So David can properly be said to be the man who liberated the land from the Philistines, not Saul, who in this regard can be said only to have checked them, as several judges had done before. This military prowess can be said to extend up to the time of the war against the Philistines after the move to Jerusalem, but after that David had at his disposal a professional army with professional commanders, and never took to the field himself again, except as a figure-head, and so his military career can be said to have ended with that campaign.

Secondly David was a brilliant politician, and this aspect of his career hardly needs to be laboured to those who have read my account of his manoeuvrings whilst Saul was still alive, and his overwhelmingly daring defection to Achish, his cultivation of Judah, and after he became King in Hebron, of the north, which resulted in his being made King over the whole land. Another clever idea of his was the move to Jerusalem, which can be said to have cemented the unity of Judah and the north. However, after the move to Jerusalem, again, David's achievements can be said to have ended, as he failed completely to anticipate the actions of his son Absalom, and to forestall that costly and divisive revolt. And other examples of his increasingly poor political judgement can be given.



Thirdly, that he was a bad King. I have said already that I regard his foreign conquests as of small importance. Perhaps Philistia, and perhaps Moab and Edom can be expected to form part of the land in the future. But the expansion of David's power over Aram is a temporary triumph only, as, as soon as any power arises in Syria, these conquests will disappear. And I would like to ask a rhetorical question on this head, namely, why our Kingdom, a prosperous one, but not very prosperous, a populous one, but not all that populous, and with no traditions of imperial delusions, needs to have any foreign empire at all? And there is another point to consider here too, if we groaned under the Philistines, and fought hard until we had freed ourselves from them, might we not expect any other nation we attempt to rule to do the same? Indeed as I write reports are current of unrest in Aram and Ammon and Edom.

As to David's domestic policy, it might be expected that a Traditionalist like myself would applaud David's mild and non-interfering rule. But I now believe that the land will never again be ruled by judges, that is, those whom El has appointed directly to govern the people, since judges could only function in a land ruled intermittently by two rival, but distant, powers, not in a land subject to constant attack from enemies close at hand. Instead I believe that we must look in the future to a line of Kings and must hope that El directs them and imbues them with wisdom, instead of the mania for military power and for tyranny that the Monarchist want their King to demonstrate as a sign of his election. David was chosen by El to rule and to found a royal line, that understood we can criticise him for his mildness, as, in a monarchy, people lose the ability to govern themselves, and disputes and litigation begin to grow, as there is the feeling that there is always a higher power in the land to which people can appeal to for justice and a resolution to these disputes. But David never acted in this way, and disputes grew and made people feel worse off than if they had had no King, as indeed in parts of the land they were.

And finally, as to David's moral character, I find him to have been weak rather than bad, for many crimes were committed in his name, but few directly by him, so that if we were to compile a register of his sins, we would find them to be few in comparison with other men's. But at the same time David often profited by the crimes that others committed and did nothing to punish them, so that he can be said to have been an accomplice in crime in many cases. Perhaps the worst aspect of his character was the way that he allowed those around him to suffer by neglect, his treatment of his wives and concubines being one example, his treatment of Meribaal another. And in this case too we can say that his sin was weakness and apathy, rather than malice, and the result of flaw in his character that never allowed him to understand the needs of others.

All these judgements will come as a great surprise to those who knew David slightly, or by word of mouth from those who did know him personally, as no man was more affable and winning in his ways, but he never performed even half of what he promised, and people's love for him was always the stronger the nearer they were to him and the more frequently they came into his presence. As time goes by and those who knew David personally grows fewer I believe that anyone who has access to accounts of his career and reign will begin to judge him less by his charisma and more by what he did, or did not, do.

As one studies history one comes more and more to realise that anyone who achieves greatness or power, or indeed, any kind of influence, only does so in the context of the times he was born in and the situation that he finds himself in at the time he begins to make his name, and as it changes during his career. David was a remarkable man, but a generation earlier and he would have been a judge, a generation later a great general perhaps, or a successful rebel against another King. But as it was, and given the achievements of Samuel and Saul in the years before his appearance on the scene, he was enabled to become King. I often wonder whether, if Saul had not been given to madness, David might have come to play an Abner to Jonathan's Saul, and this might have been the best role he could have played, for Jonathan, I am sure, would have made a better King, and David, as a general, would always have had things do, and could never have felt that there was nothing left to achieve, which is why he gave way to apathy and accidie, as he did when he became King.

But a cynic would say, and there are many cynics amongst us, that all our efforts are effort wasted. For, one such might argue, if Samuel, Saul and David had never lived, and the Philistines had conquered the land, what would have happened? We should have groaned under unjust taxation and the oppression of corrupt officials. And what have we gained by having our own Kings? Well, this is to anticipate the next chapter, we have begun to see unjust taxation and to feel the oppression of corrupt officials. The only difference is that we speak the same language as these officials, so that the indignity is worse.

Indeed, although we are a very religious people and like to assert that everything that happens as the result of El's commands, and that he punishes the evil-doer and rewards the righteous, we see many thing daily that seem hard to reconcile with these hopeful beliefs. And sharing in this pessimistic view is a traditional gnostic poem that we have, some of the verse of which seem particularly appropriate to these considerations:

I saw that in this world  
The swift runner often does not win the race,  
The greatest warrior often does not win the battle,  
That wise men often lack bread,  
That intelligent men often lack money,  
That clever men often lack favour,  
And all are subject to time and chance.

Man does not know what will happen to him,  
Like fish that are suddenly taken in a net,  
Or birds suddenly taken in a snare,  
So undeserved misfortune suddenly comes upon men.

And some of my readers may care to read this story in this way too.

## XII

### **The New Monarchy and Conclusion**

When Solomon, backed by Zadok and his faction, took power he was completely unopposed. Indeed it was a mark of how completely the land had become used to a monarchical government that there was hardly any expression of support for Adonijah, or any other of the sons of David, as opposed to Solomon. In Saul's day each of his sons had the support of different factions of the people, who were allowed to voice their preferences in the matter of the succession to the throne. Though indeed there was nothing anyone could do to stop them doing this. But if, now, there was no support for any other candidate but Solomon, there was, by the same token, very little spontaneous enthusiasm for him. The Elders of Judah and the Council of Jerusalem were summoned to the palace to pay their homage, and a few days later Solomon and his entourage travelled to Gibeon to begin to receive the homage of the north. But so few people turned out that the extensive tour around the northern centres that had been planned was cancelled, and the homage that he had received there was held to be sufficient to demonstrate the loyalty of Israel. It is astonishing how quickly the people of the land had learnt to treat everything that their ruler did with the sort of glum acquiescence that is the mark of populace of any monarchy, or any autocracy. I had seen this demeanour all too often in my travels in Egypt, Syria, and Babylonia, and was sorry to see it appear in my own land.

Apart from the securing of homage the first priority of the new regime was the burial of David. This was carried out a few days after his death, outside the city walls to the east, and a grand tomb was planned to cover the site of his grave. Just as there was very little public reaction to Solomon's accession, very few people gave any sign of mourning David, beyond the decencies of public mourning, and the crowds at his burial were very thin. Nor was there much mourning in the royal household—the fact was that nothing very much had changed about the palace. David's wives and concubines stayed mewed up in the women's quarters, but then they had been immured there since the court moved to Jerusalem. I often wonder whether any of his wives mourned him: Abigail, Ahinoam, Haggith the mother of Adonijah, Bathsheba, Michal and the rest. I suspect that if they grieved at all it was for the youthful David, the handsome warrior, but he had died long before. Similarly all those people who had been associated with David in his youth were either too busy politicking in the new regime, or had died, or had been away from the court during David's reign at Jerusalem. At this time I was in Jerusalem and used to walk on the walls for exercise and I used to see a few people around the tomb of David, across the valley. Sometimes I could pick out a mother and

her children, perhaps out for a walk and the mother telling the children that this was the grave of the famous King David and relating his deeds. At other times I could make out the odd old bent figure, perhaps an old soldier visiting the tomb to say farewell to his commander. But there were few of these, and mostly the grave-plot was deserted save for the sentries leaning on their spears and nodding in the heat.

The only person I knew who mourned for David was Abiathar, who put on sack-cloth, when he heard the news, and covered his head in ashes, and sat in a darkened room in his house, hardly eating for weeks. But then he was perhaps David's oldest acquaintance at court, as he had joined him soon after the murder of his father and brothers by Saul. When orders came from the new King that he was to go into exile, to the place of his family's origin, Anathoth in Benjamin, it is said he smiled. I went to visit him shortly before his departure and wanted to go with him, but he told me that, as an associate of his, I was already under suspicion, and that to accompany him would mean my own, and my family's, ruin and so we parted. I had served him for twenty-five years, and I never saw him again, for a few months later news came of his death.

As well as Abiathar, Solomon and his advisers wanted to get rid of all possible dangerous people at the court. Thus a few days after Solomon's return from Gibeon Adonijah was killed in the palace by Benaniah, one of David's 'Thirty Chief Men' and the new general of the army. The story put out was that Adonijah was aspiring to the throne, and a sign of this was that he had visited Bathsheba and asked her to ask Solomon if he could marry Abishag, David's last bed-fellow. It is difficult to believe that Solomon expected anyone to believe this story. Adonijah had been promised his life if he left the sanctuary of the temple, and then placed under house arrest. He had no opportunity to meet Abishag, and even if he loved her he was hardly in a position to contemplate marriage, and even Adonijah was not naive enough not to realise that asking for Abishag in marriage was a dangerous political statement, as she had been, at least nominally, David's concubine.

As soon as Joab heard of the death of Adonijah he too fled to the temple and took sanctuary and Solomon sent Benaniah to order him to come to him. But Joab said: 'No, I will die here.' Solomon, on hearing this, ordered Benaniah to return and kill him in the sanctuary itself, which he did. I am surprised that Joab did not try to defend himself, or at least try to kill Benaniah, but I suppose he was just tired of life. If his purpose in staying in the sanctuary was to cause a stain on the reputation of the new regime, by forcing them to murder him in that holy place, then he failed, as no one reacted at all to this profanation, and Zadok did not even have to release the closely-argued theological justification that he had had prepared.

The new regime likewise took care to purge any of the lesser men about the court whom it perceived to be a threat and to install its own appointees. I myself at this time ceased

to frequent the court and lived in the Jerusalem for a little while and then retired to my home-town in Judah. All of us who had had any connection with the other party in David's reign expected to be persecuted, and some were, but others were not. I, for example, was never persecuted, nor was I ever watched or followed, and I attribute this firstly to the fact that, apart from speaking the debate in Council that I mentioned earlier, I was never prominent in Abiathar's faction at court, and secondly to the fact that my family, uncles, brothers, cousins, were business partners and agents of David and continued to fulfil the same role for Solomon. In some cases, however, the revenge of the new court was petty in the extreme. For example, they sought out Shimei the Benjamite, the man who had organised the Benjamites to taunt and curse at David after Absalom's revolt, and forced him to live in Jerusalem, and to promise not to venture outside the city walls. A few months later when Shimei thought that he was not being watched any longer, he left the city to attend to some business, but on his return he was dragged before the King and questioned, and finally he was condemned to death. 'But your father promised me my life,' he protested. 'But *I* never did,' said the King, and he was taken away and executed.

I will not take this history much further, as my task of writing the life of King David is almost done, but I must, before I finish, describe the character of the new King and describe the new policies he has adopted in this reign. I will bring the story down to the time that I am writing, that is, the fifth year of King Solomon's reign, and then end.

The King was, as I said, twelve years old when he succeeded, but mature and wise beyond his years. He had inherited all his father's intelligence and good looks, and winning ways, but had hardly left the palace since he was born and never had the experience of not being waited on constantly the whole time. Nor had he ever got to know the common people, how they lived, how they thought about things. Thus for all his cleverness he had the makings of a royal tyrant from the very first. Moreover, like Amnon and Absalom and Adonijah, he never considered that he had to do anything, all he had to do was order that something be done, and, behold, it was done. But unlike his half-brothers he was in a position where this delusion was never contradicted, as he *was* King. And thus in his policies he has never shown any appreciation that kings, just as other men, can only do things which are possible, not the impossible. Furthermore, Solomon and his advisers were delighted to discover on opening the treasury building that David had had constructed near his palace that there was an enormous quantity of gold and silver and specie, and jewels and costly merchandise of all kinds stored there, the amount of which they had never suspected. For David had gained enormous wealth in his time, and had spent very little, both from natural inclination and from a desire to leave his successor the means to build the temple that he had planned. This sudden

access of wealth also had the effect of unsettling Solomon's grip on reality, as great wealth, like great power, breeds delusions.

Solomon and his court were not slow to begin spending this wealth. In the first place Solomon re-equipped his army with a large force of chariots. David had had the good sense to have only a small squadron of chariots, as he hardly ever needed them and they are ruinously expensive to buy and maintain. When he ever needed a large force for a campaign he hired them, either with or without their drivers. And moreover since David had devised the tactics whereby a force of infantry in open country can defend themselves against a full force of chariots with only a little training, these tactics have become commonplace, so that chariot forces are becoming rather obsolete. But this did not stop Solomon from importing from Egypt a thousand in one go, at six hundred shekels apiece, with horses to go with them. He also started a policy of reconstructing the fortifications of all the major cities in his Kingdom and expanding the army—and all this at a time of peace.

In Jerusalem he began to extend the walls of David's city to surround the hill to the north where the new temple was to be built, and where he planned an enormous new palace. The temple itself is being built with no expense spared—gold, silver, bronze, cedar, fine stone, all of these materials are being bought at enormous cost from all over the Kingdom. And the palace is being built at even greater cost, and with even more costly materials. Indeed the only good thing about these buildings is that they have produced an open rift between Zadok and the King. For in truth the King is much too imperious ever to brook anything other than servile and slavish advisers, and Zadok, having made Solomon King, expected to govern him, at least until he reached manhood. But Solomon, from the first few weeks of his reign, showed his independence, and, although Zadok was by no means reluctant to pander to the King's extravagance, they finally disagreed over these very temple plans. For Solomon, encouraged perhaps by his mother, is not the single-minded devotee of El and all the historical fictions that Zadok created. Instead he plans a new temple of Asherah at Jerusalem, on an equally large scale to that of El, and already elsewhere in the Kingdom he has begun to construct temples to foreign gods.

Thus Zadok, in the third year of his reign was dismissed from his offices and officially retired, and his son Azariah was appointed to the new position of High Priest at Jerusalem. (If Abiathar had been alive to hear this he would have snorted and asked whether the title of 'Priest' was not honour enough, as it once had been).

But all these extravagances began to deplete the treasury. Imagine an expenditure that used up in three or four years the wealth that had taken thirty years to accumulate! And thus Solomon began to see the need to increase his revenue. First he renewed and increased the taxes on the foreign dominions of the Kingdom. And he also increased the forced levies

in these parts; these two measures, of course, added to the discontent that was already felt there. Next he began to plan to gather taxes within the Kingdom proper. He got out the census returns that Joab had gathered some ten years earlier. Then he and his advisers also got out Zadok's plan of the land with its division into tribes. Although this was not followed in its entirety, some allowance being made for reality, these two partial and inadequate documents were made the basis for a new general taxation of the Kingdom. However, incredibly, Judah was exempt from taxation, as Solomon obviously felt himself to be King of Judah, who also happened to rule Israel as a foreign country. Thus not only was the taxation applied on the basis of an inadequate census, and in twelve districts which hardly corresponded to any real divisions of people or population, but half the land was not taxed at all! Solomon's latest act of tyranny has been to extend the forced levy of labour across the land, again, sparing Judah, to supply labour and materials for all his grandiose building projects— and this under the command of the brutal and stupid Adoniram.

I only have two more things to say about David's unworthy son. His latest policy, that of imposing forced labour on the land, is coupled with another policy which make me weep to describe it. Although Solomon is happy in his worship many gods, El, Asherah, and the others he has collected, and although he knows that the story of Israel's sojourn in Egypt is a religious myth, largely invented by Zadok, he has begun to divide the people of the land on the basis of their alleged descent from 'Israel'. So those who are lucky to have genealogies that lead back to senior families in Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin and Judah, and those groups allied with them, are now called 'Israelites' and pay lesser taxes, but anyone who is descended from other groups in the land, the Calebites, the Gibeonites, the Kenites, and those others we have mentioned in the course of this account, are now 'Canaanites', and pay greater taxes and have to provide more labour to the state. And yet their families have lived in the land as long, and often longer than the 'Israelites', and they speak the same language, have the same customs and worship the same deities. And yet further, if Solomon *does* believe in this account of the descent of the 'Israelites' from a pure stock of immigrants from Egypt, why does his taxation system discriminate between Judah and the north, who are equally, in this view, Israelites? One of the most heart-rending features of tyrannical systems is that their machinery of administration and government is not even consistent in its delusions.

Finally Solomon abandoned the foreign policy of his father and concluded an alliance with Egypt, which was cemented with his marriage to Pharaoh's daughter, and the acceptance of half a dozen Egyptian gods, to add to his pantheon. Solomon handed over to Egypt, as a bride-price, the whole of Philistia, which had looked very much like it was going to become fully part of the land, with the virtual extinction of Philistine military culture. But



now, under Egyptian rule, this is certain to revive, and so all the effort of Samuel and Saul and David will have been wasted. And after giving Philistia away Solomon was delighted to receive back as a dowry with his bride the city of Gezer, which had been his to begin with, and to buy hundreds of second-hand Egyptian war-chariots from them at new prices.

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I have now finished my task. I began to write this history in the last few years of David's reign, when I begin to fear that genuine records of David's life and career would be lost as an official version of his life begin to be constructed. I have taken ten years over the project, but I have not been idle during this time, as the research for the work was laborious and I had other duties to attend to for much of the time. Besides there have been times when I was away from my materials for many months and other times when I thought it prudent to stop my writing and conceal what I had written.

Looking back through the work I remember that at the beginning I wrote very quickly and joyfully, as the events of the early career of David, as I reviewed them, brought back so many happy emotions from the time of my youth, but that as soon as I began to narrate the events of David's reign itself the going got much harder, because more and more I found I was disapproving of the King, and was more disapproving than I had thought I was. And indeed in this period the writing was more difficult for me because though there were more materials, there were also fewer events that needed relating. As to the sequel, the beginning of the reign of Solomon, I realise that what I have written is nothing less than pure treason and that it will be impossible for me to publish this work with this conclusion in the Kingdom.

I have decided now that I will ask my brother Abiel for a position with the family firm somewhere in Babylonia and leave the land. I will then revise my work and have copies made and I will send them secretly to the various cultic centres around the land and ask the priests to hide them away in their archives, and this they will do for me in grateful memory of my master Abiathar. I will also translate this work into Akkadian and Aramiac and donate copies to the various libraries of the various cities of Babylonia and Syria, and I may send copies to my friends in Egypt too. And perhaps then this history will be widely available to those scholars in the future who may care to investigate the history of this land in this period.

If anyone, reading this work in the future, should find the events narrated herein exciting and enthralling, and should take pleasure in reading about them, then all to the good; if the sentiments expressed in these pages should agree with the reader's own sentiments, then good again. But if a future reader should find the sentiments expressed here to be those

of a crabbed and prejudiced old man, and the narrative dull and over-hasty, or unbelievable, so much the better again, for this will encourage that reader to seek out other accounts of these times and compare them to my own, and in doing so he will come to an understanding of these events that will better suit his own judgement.

Farewell.

## XIII

### Editor's Epilogue

The dates usually assigned to the events narrated by Shammah are: 22nd-19th centuries BCE—the arrival of the Aramaeans in the land of Canaan; 1400 BCE—the arrival in the land of 'Israel'; 1050 BCE onwards—the period of Samuel's activity; 1020 BCE—Saul becomes King in the land; 1000 BCE—David King in Hebron; 995-965 BCE David King in Jerusalem; 965-931 BCE—reign of Solomon.

Shammah's gloomy assessment of the beginning of Solomon's reign was prescient. Solomon reigned for another thirty years, but his extravagant expenditure on building and the military bankrupted his kingdom. We read that at some point in his reign, in lieu of debt, he was forced to cede twenty coastal cities of his kingdom to Hiram of Tyre, perhaps the same King who had helped David and Solomon with building materials, but more likely a successor of the same name. Solomon's oppressive taxation and imposition of forced labour created such unrest in his domains that by the end of his reign Edom had seceded under Hadad, returned from his exile in Egypt, and Aram was in open revolt under one Razon. In Israel Jeroboam, once the superintendent of the forced labour, had been anointed King by Ahijah the prophet. But Ahijah told Jeroboam to wait until the death of Solomon before claiming the Kingship, just as Samuel had told David to wait for the death of Saul.

On the death of Solomon he was succeeded by his son Rehoboam, who, going to claim the homage of Israel, was asked to ameliorate Solomon's harsh rule, and told the north: 'My father chastised you with whips, I will chastise you with scorpions', which were apparently an even crueller instrument of torture. Not surprisingly Israel seceded and chose Jeroboam for its King, who made Shechem its chief cultic centre, with the Golden Calf of Israel as its national diety. David's empire vanished overnight and the only remnant left was Moab, which the Kings of Israel continue to control for some time.

After this Judah and Israel continued as separate kingdoms. Israel was at times quite powerful and influential and was always more prosperous than its southern neighbour. But this power only served in the end only to incur the hostility of Assyria, the rising power from the north than Shammah predicted. (The land he calls Syria in his account we know as Assyria, that is the upper reaches of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers; the area of the modern state of Syria, centred around Damascus, he calls Aram). In 721 the Assyrians besieged the capital of Israel, Samaria, captured it and deported the whole of the aristocracy and priestly class of Israel, along with many of the people, and settled the north with various groups of

people from elsewhere in their empire. Thus the ‘Ten Tribes of Israel’ disappear from history.

Judah, because smaller and poorer, survived for some time after Israel, but in 587 the Babylonians, successors in dominion to the Assyrians, captured Jerusalem and deported the ruling classes to Babylonia, and thus Judah was extinguished as a state.

However, in Babylonia the Judite priesthood began a major recension of the country’s records and histories. The framework they used was one that was a direct descendent of some of the ideas that Zadok puts forward in Shammah’s account: that all the twelve tribe of Israel went into Egypt and returned and that there were exactly twelve tribes, that they had a God-given right to the land, that they were distinct from the ‘Canaanites’. To this they added further refinements: that Israel had fallen away from its inheritance by seceding from the united kingdom, that Judah had become the true Israel, that El, now called Yahweh, was not only more powerful than any other gods, but was the only true God in the Universe, that the Jewish (from Judah) people were God’s chosen people, and so on. They took the historical records of the land of Canaan, and of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and edited them to prove this history and theology; this resulted in the books of the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deutoronomy) and the historical books (Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings) and to this they added as many of the poetic prophecies of early prophets, such as the first Isaiah, Hosea, Amos and Micah as suited their purposes, and the prophecies of their own colleagues, the religious reformers Ezekiel and Jeremiah. After the Babylonia Empire had been conquered by the Persians many of the Jewish exiles were allowed to return (5th century BCE onwards). In Judah the canon of scripture was later supplemented with later works of prophecy, a slightly different version of history (1 & 2 Chronicles), books of Psalms (the liturgical canon of the *second* temple), of wisdom and of later history (Ezra, Nehemiah). The Old Testament as we know it took its final shape about 100 BCE.

But of course the religious history contained in the Old Testament does not correspond to the complex religious history of Israel and Judah that we can infer from the documents subsumed into the historical books. This inference is made more certain by the fact that, even as edited, the historical books often contain different accounts of the same events (who did kill Goliath, for example? compare 1 Samuel 17: 19 ff, and 2 Samuel 21: 18 ff). In particular to posit a monotheistic Yahweh worship before the Exile is anachronistic and to push this worship back further, to the time of David, means that the biblical account taken literally is not history, but myth. And yet it is clear that many of the documents that were used to compile the biblical account are detailed and realistic enough for us to call them history, as Shammah’s account is.

It is this sort of openness of the biblical text which is one of the most marked features of the story of King David. In particular many of the passages in 1 & 2 Samuel seem to come from a source which is anti-monarchical, and others which come from a source which is pro-monarchical; biblical scholars have given these two strands the names of the Late Source and the Early Source respectively, though there seems little evidence that the Early Source is very early (ie contemporary with the events), other than that it contains vivid, apparently eyewitness accounts of the events, though this may well simply be a literary device. So even in the supposedly unified account of the Bible we find a divided interpretation, some passages indicating that David was chosen by God to lead his people, others which imply that the monarchy was a second-best solution that God gave his people when they were too sinful to be ruled by judges any longer—though most of these strictures are deflected from David and made to apply to Saul. In later Jewish commentary David is depicted as the ideal divinely-chosen monarch, but there is also a surprising strain of rabbinical criticism of his failings: his over-confidence, his carrying out a census, his lack of judgement in the Ziba-Meribaal case and in his failure to anticipate Absalom's revolt. On the other hand the rabbis exonerate him from any blame in the Bathsheba affair, as this led to the reign of Solomon, which, surprisingly, is considered the most important chapter in the history of Israel, probably because of the building of the first temple.

In Christianity too there is a divergence of opinion about David, on the one hand he is a type of Christ, that is, an imperfect anticipation in divine history of the perfection of Christ, on the other hand he is seen as a deeply sinful human being, redeemed only by his sincere repentance, as figured in the Psalms.

One of the interests, then, in Shammah's history is that it is a contemporary account of David's reign, written from a consistent political viewpoint and a credible religious one, and from which it is possible to deduce the process by which the conflicting and contradictory accounts of the biblical text have derived their narrative and their incidents, both from this extant document and from other, similar documents now lost.