

DAVID: SUBJECT-KING

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THE PHILISTINES ARE ENCAMPED against him, his armies retreating. Samuel is a no-show. Saul's fate is bleak, at best. Things are not looking favorable for him. YHWH must have got up on the wrong side of the proverbial bed this morning; his hand is against his people Israel. Time for a peace offering. Time for a sacrifice.

Enter Samuel.

"What d'you think you're doing?" roars the seer.

"Oh, there you are!" Saul stammers. "Just in time for the battle I was getting ready to be about to begin to fight."

Saul has a problem. He does not know the LORD.

"You acted foolishly," Samuel said. "You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out *a man after his own heart* and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command." (I Sam 13.13-14)

A man after his own heart. A peculiar phrase. A deceptive one to a post-Freudian world. The temptation to sentimentalize, to *ooh* and to *ahh*, is well nigh unbearable. Yet, while such stuff may have its place, that is not the meaning here. To understand the meaning of the phrase it is apposite to consider its context.

What is the sin of Saul? First, it is not that he is overly unsentimental, nor is it that he is particularly aloof. The sin of Saul is that he refused to slaughter the Philistines against disastrous odds, despite God's command that he do so. The sin of Saul is fear. It

is disbelief. It is a practical ignorance of God's peculiar devotion to his people. Saul does not know the power of God because he does not count on it. He would sooner believe that YHWH is against Israel than that he is for her. The sin of Saul is disobedience, particularly in a militaristic context.

It is at this point that God rejects Saul in favor of the man after his own heart who — according to Paul's sermon to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch — “will do everything I want him to do.” Highly unsentimental in this light, the *man after his own heart* is the one who will charge headfirst into the throws of the battle, against all odds, in blind faith and absolute obedience. This man will do unquestioningly what YHWH wants done.

According to Paul, David was precisely this man. The purpose of this essay will be to demonstrate from a literary-critical perspective that David was indeed the Man-After-God's-Own-Heart, and to investigate certain of his characteristics which helped to facilitate the achievement of that *office*. It is this writer's contention that it is because he was *first* a man of sheep, of soul and of stock, and then a man of self-abnegation, of sacrifice and of submission, that David *became* the Man-After-God's-Own-Heart — in short, the Subject-King. Of course, the meaning of each will be defined in due course.

Man of Sheep. In biblical literature, the shepherd is much more than a herder of sheep. Besides the obvious anthropomorphism, i.e., YHWH as shepherd of his people, there is the Mosaic reference. Before Moses became the proxy-shepherd of Israel, he was the literal shepherd of sheep; it was the wilderness-preparatory stage of his career. It was as

Moses saw to tending his sheep that he came upon the burning bush. Moreover, it was a sign — an antetype to the type he would become. Typically, when a shepherd is seen in Scripture, something rather tremendous is about to happen.¹

Thus, when Samuel came to Bethlehem to anoint the new king of Israel, and when — not finding him among the eldest of Jesse's sons — he asked if there was another, Jesse's response was not paradoxical but confirmatory. "There is still the youngest, but he is tending the sheep." To the Jewish mind that is the confirmation of David, not merely a quirk or an aside — king and shepherd are not contradictions; they go hand-in-hand. It is the prerequisite to becoming the man of God. It is a literary clue in God's narrative. David's shepherding, then, is neither incidental nor merely a matter of ovinology.² It is to be his vocation. The nature of the shepherd provides the proper framework within which David is able to take up the office of Man-After-God's-Own-Heart.

This begins to take shape very early on in the story. David has fled Jerusalem and is now living in the cave of Adullam. The historian tells us that "all those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him, and he became their leader. About four hundred men were with him" (I Sam 22.2). This is no small matter. The literary implications here are staggering. The pronoun *those* and its qualifiers *all* and *who were in distress* strike right to the core of the Jewish psyche. Indeed, one cannot

¹ This symbolism is apparent in the messianic birth narrative of Luke's gospel. To the Jewish mind, the presence of the shepherd directly precedes the momentous intervention of God. The two great shepherds of old — Moses and David — are projected into the shepherds on the plain, the witnesses of the birth of Messiah, who is both their kind, i.e., *lawgiver, king*, and their superior, i.e., *the type to their antetype*.

² That which pertains to sheep, from the Latin *ovine*.

understand Israel's sense of identity apart from the story of her bondage to Egypt and of YHWH's deliverance. This singular narrative event provides the core motivation for Israel's obedience to the law (Ex 6.20-25) and gives her an eschatological sense of direction. The very nucleus of Israel is a people *in distress*.

To say, then, that "all those who were in distress" gathered around David, and that he became their leader is, again, to hark back to Moses.³ Not only that, it is to paint a paradigmatic portrait of *genuine* Israel and her *genuine* shepherd. The proper leader of Israel is the one who from the very outset of his career attracts the particular kind of people whose plight *is* that of the nation. David and his men are the exodus remembered. Once again, the people of God find themselves outside the promised-land, clinging to the promise.

Furthermore, in contrast to Saul who seems to have been fundamentally egocentric,⁴ David, as shepherd, was remarkably natiocentric. As shepherd, his concern was for each man of Israel. For instance, after David and four hundred of his men⁵ rescued their families from the Amalekite raiders, they returned with plunder to the two hundred men who had stayed behind. Now many among the four hundred did not

³ Reading this text from a Christological perspective, the messianic undertones are unmistakable. To the first-century Jew with ears to hear and eyes to see, Jesus' healing power — being nothing less than the power to restore outcasts to new community — is the same power exercised by David in the cave of Adullam.

⁴ "Now the Philistines will come down *against me* at Gilgal, and *I have not* sought the LORD's favor" (I Sam 13.12). Saul could only conceive of the LORD's favor in individualistic terms because he did not have a vision of Israel's vocation, as we shall see by way of contrast later. This makes for a bad king, and a worse pre-Enlightenment man.

⁵ His army had grown by fifty percent since Adullam.

want to share the plunder with the two hundred. Why should the reward of the worker be shared with the man who did no work?

Yet David attributed their victory to the hand of the LORD and considered the plunder not the work of their own hands but the gift of God. "All will share alike," he declared, and he made the practice normative (I Sam 30.21-31).⁶ This collectivistic ethic has no particular moral quality. Rather, it is rooted in David's holistic vision of Israel as YHWH's peculiar elect. Neither is David's collectivism a programmatic one; it is simply characteristic of a people wrought by God in the "incomparable riches of his grace." Since God is the patron of Israel as a whole, all Israel reaps the benefits.

Likewise, another of the characteristics of the proxy-shepherd is his patronage. This is evident in David in the account of the ark of the covenant's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. A multitude gathered around the tent. After David made the sacrifices and peace offerings, "he blessed the people in the name of the LORD Almighty. Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to *each person in the whole crowd of Israelites*, both men and women" (II Sam 18-19). There is no model prior to this event that David here is following. As proxy-shepherd, David recognizes that he is patron. His gift to "each person in the whole crowd of Israelites" is a symbolic representation of his entire vocation. This is a conscious decision on David's part, underwritten, again, by his vision of Israel as YHWH's elect. In contrast to Saul, whose heavy taxation

⁶ Again, looking back Christocentrically, we see that this prefigures the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt 20.1 ff).

beleaguered the nation, David says, “That is not the nature of my kingship. I am neither your dictator nor your better, but your benefactor and kinsman.”⁷

In this way, and in a host of others, David truly did “what was just and right for all his people” (II Sam 8.15). It is in the nature of the shepherd to look after the whole flock by attending to the needs of every individual. As we have seen, there was no particular moral expediency to David’s agenda. Nor was there much of an example for David to follow. In fact, he was treading entirely new ground. He was, after all, only the second king of Israel, and Saul was clearly no help to him. It is clear that the shepherd-like nature of David’s rule was derived principally from his very big vision of Israel, and from his even bigger vision of the God who formed her.

The historian tells us that after the palace had been built for David, he knew “that the LORD had established him as king over Israel and had exalted his kingdom *for the sake of his people Israel* (II Sam 5.12). David was profoundly aware that he was an actor in God’s history. He also knew that the *principal* character in that same narrative was Israel, and accordingly that all God had done and was bound to do in him and through him will not have been for him, but for the sake of God’s peculiar people.

⁷ This event, again Christocentrically, is exactly parallel to the feeding of the five thousand. It was not so much in the miracle as it was in the giving of the bread itself that Jesus made the claim to be patron of Israel. This is precisely why the crowds rushed to make Jesus king. They recognized rightly the Davidic nature of Jesus. Indeed, they *must* have remembered this very event we see here in II Samuel 6. The miraculous “presence of God” in the multiplication of bread would correspond to the presence in the ark of the covenant. The point in both instances is that God is here, and as a result, you are being fed. The distribution of bread is a kingly vocation symbolic of the relationship of God to Israel.

Parenthetically, in the temptation narrative, the temptation of Jesus to turn the stone into bread has strong messianic implications. Jesus’ hunger is representative of the hunger of his people, and the temptation is not so much to eat, as it is to feed Israel with worldly bread. The context of the “man does not live by bread alone” quotation is the event of the manna from heaven. Jesus knew that his very body — broken in death — was to be that bread, and so he could not use worldly political means to become the patron-king of Israel. That would defeat the purpose, but it was a very real temptation.

David knew that Israel herself was a vocation in all the world, and that her existence was at the center of God's plan for the world. He envisioned an Israel on the move throughout history, far beyond his own time, into the nether-regions of time itself. This vision was the compass guiding all he did. That a man's entire life and methodology could be so overwhelmingly driven by something as elusive as a "vision" is explicable only if we are to understand David as a

Man of Soul. It may be no coincidence that the very next time we see David, after first seeing him as shepherd, we see him as harpist. There is something to be said for this, but perhaps it is better left unsaid, lest we should draw more from the text than is there. At least this much can be said for certain: there was music enough in the soul — or is it soul enough in the music? — of David to quiet even a tormenting spirit from the LORD himself. Rare is the man in whom true music resides. David seems to have been that particular kind of man, even amid all the din of bloodshed.

He was that rare kind of man with an immense capacity for intimacy, whose soul was so densely intertwined with that of another that truly it could be said of him that he loved his neighbor as himself (I Sam 20.17). So absolute was his love for Jonathan that once David's kingdom had been established, he asked, "Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?" Perhaps more than anything else, he was that rare kind of man who wept the most (I Sam 20.41).

This man of soul could mourn. He could mourn the death of the man whose love was to him "more wonderful than that of women" (II Sam 1.26), just as he could mourn

the death of the very men who sought his life (II Sam 1.17 ff; 3.31-34; 18.33). His laments betray a soul too poor for poverty, too rich for riches. His was one that could not be broken by the violent schemes of men. The only thing powerful enough to break his soul was his soul itself, for it held so much inside it. David simply was a man who felt.

Just as profoundly as he felt the sting of sorrow, he felt the turbulence of joy. And as the presence of the LORD was ushered into Jerusalem, David danced. He danced with all his might. He danced till his robe abandoned him in shame. Then he danced the more. He danced till the woman who loved him despised him. Then he danced the more. When she tried to rebuke him, to remind him of dignity and duty, he would not stop the dance. “*I will celebrate before the LORD,*” he boasted. “*I will become even more undignified than this!*” He spoke as a man of soul, as a man who in his soul knew the very meaning of history: his joy was in “*the LORD who chose*” (II Sam 6.21).

It was because of David’s intimate knowledge of YHWH’s sovereign choice that his soul was constantly moved to prayer and thanksgiving. Unlike Saul whose heart trembled with fear before the Philistines, who did not understand the meaning of Israel or the power of her God, David could magnify the LORD. The same boy, unaffected by the giant, was the man who trembled before the God who “*went out to redeem a people for himself*” (II Sam 7.23). His fear was not like Saul’s, who feared God because of his own uncertainty. David feared a God who could be so certain. The soul of David found terrible joy in the One who would make an everlasting promise, and keep it.

Thus his was a soul intimately awake to the direction of history. It was this acute awareness that shaped him over decades. It was his grip on the promise of God that

made him wise. That is why an old man sent into exile by his own son, upon learning of the betrayal of a beloved confidant, could trust — almost effortlessly — in the God of the promise. “Oh Lord,” the king sighed. “Turn Ahithophel’s counsel into foolishness” (II Sam 15.31). Bittersweet memories reminded him that the plans of God would not be foiled by the cunning of men. Truly the wisest soul is the one that knows the meaning of Israel. This wisdom, even in its incipient years, is what made David a

Man of Stock. Unlike Saul, David knew the LORD. Even as a boy, he understood the implications of Israel. Like all Israelites — Saul included — David believed that the one true and living God had set apart a people for himself. David believed that the history of his people was the very history of God’s intervention in the world. He believed that Israel and none other was God’s peculiar elect. What set David apart from Saul and all Israel is that he simply followed that idea through to its logical conclusion. To put the words of Paul in David’s mouth, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Neither lion nor bear nor giant could stand in the way of what God was doing in history.

He looked a fool for sure as a he stepped out to face Goliath. No Israelite would have expected such an enormous victory from such a small package. Indeed, the stench of tragedy and doom filled their nostrils as David made his approach. But David was awake to another world. He was awake to the real world in which God *chooses*. He rejected the fantasy world in which his kinsmen huddled. David knew that God had already made up his mind about that day. He knew that God had made up his mind once-and-for-all when he called Israel out of Egypt. It took no great faith for David to

do what he did. David was the ultimate realist. If YHWH really was the God of Israel then the battle really was the LORD's (I Sam 17.47). David knew that YHWH — and not his self — was the champion. The question David asked was not, Am I strong enough to conquer? The question David asked was, Is there a God in Israel?⁸ He did not set out to slay a giant, but to prove a thesis.

Indeed, David was not a strong man. The historian will not let us think that he was. We are forced to concede that David was a weak man who *found strength in God*. It was a fearful David that hid from Saul in the desert of Ziph, and it was to this David that Jonathan came, to remind him of God's promise, that he would indeed be king over Israel. The historian tells us that in this way Jonathan "helped him find strength in God" (I Sam 23.16). By clinging to nothing but a promise, David exchanged his weakness for strength.

Again, when David and his men returned to their homes in Ziklag, only to find it in ruins and their families taken captive, David is portrayed at first in weakness. We read that "David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him" (I Sam 30.6). Who would not be distressed at that? Yet David distinguishes himself again by refusing to become, like the others, "bitter in spirit." Instead, "David found strength in the LORD his God." It seems the historian would have us understand what David himself understood: there is indeed a God in Israel and the actions of the man of God

⁸ The technical term for this is *absolute theism*. It is the idea that everything one does one does because there is a God. Mark Moore is arguing in his doctoral thesis that this is the proper framework within which to approach Jesus' nonviolent agenda and, moreover, that it was because of Jesus' absolute theism that he went willfully to the cross. H. Richard Niebuhr argues similarly for pacifism, without using the specific terminology, in his 1932 article "On the Grace of Doing Nothing," which can be found on my website: <http://thomeric.com/essays/>

are born of that presence. Again, David chooses to awaken himself to the real world in which God has the final word.

Even in his old age, David refused to acknowledge any other reality. The song he sang at the twilight of his sojourn is the very same song he had been singing from the beginning:

The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation. He is my stronghold, my refuge and my savior. [...] For who is God besides the LORD? And who is the Rock except our God? *It is God who arms me with strength* and makes my way perfect. (II Sam 22.1-3; 32-33)

Thus from the first to the last it is clear that David was a man of stock fundamentally because YHWH was the God of Israel. Never once did David claim victory as his own. He could not because he knew his weakness. He could not because he knew the battle belonged to the LORD. And it was precisely such an awareness that paved the way for the

Man of Self-Abnegation. One would think that the man to whom the promise of kingship was given would only find it natural to pursue that course. But not David. On the contrary, what was most natural for David was to put the reigns of history where they rightfully belonged — in the hands of God. Despite the very strident truth that he *had been anointed* by Samuel, David continued to regard Saul as the inimitable messiah of Israel.

What could be more acceptable and pleasing than that the man who would be king should first be son to the king and so succeed him peaceably? That was, at least, the guise of the proposition put forward by the king himself (I Sam 18.17), and yet

David could not bring himself even to think in those terms. “Who am I, and what is my family or my father’s clan in Israel, that I should become the king’s son-in-law?” This from the man who knew — better than any man in history ever had known — the precise direction of his future. This initial refusal was no denial of what he knew to be true about himself. Rather, it was an expression of David’s faith in the God who authors history.⁹

Likewise, twice David had opportunity to take what was rightfully his. An insane messiah was pursuing David to wipe him from the face of the earth, and twice “the LORD” had delivered Saul into the hand of David. David’s refusal to touch the LORD’s anointed is the quintessential paradigm of his self-abnegation. It is absolute theism *par excellence*. David knew the outcome of this history but refused to steal from God the means to that end. Yet unwittingly in his refusal to define the means, he did in fact define them. The anointed one of Israel is the one who in absolute denial of self clings to the promise. The man of God is marked by faith, or he is not the man of God. In his refusal to become what he was bound to be, David became what he was bound to be. The veracity of his destiny was vindicated (I Sam 24.20).

It is for this same reason that David wreaked vengeance upon the murderers of Saul and his son Ish-Bosheth (II Sam 1.1-16; 4.7-12). They imagined they were helping David’s cause, but David rejected such means. David himself did not use them, and he

⁹ Of course, it could also have been that he found Merab particularly unattractive. But that’s more than likely a projection of our own value system into a foreign text. David’s later acceptance of the hand of Michal was contingent upon David’s performing an act of God. That David collected two hundred foreskins instead of the requisite one hundred is David’s way of saying, “I will advance in this world only inasmuch as God by his mighty hand advances me.”

would not abide the man that did. As far as David was concerned, God would do it, or it would not be done. To David it was not so much a moral issue as it was — if we may import a modern term — a theological crisis. Because there was a God in Israel David's path to the throne did not have to be forged in blood. Any attempt to forge his own path was tantamount to an attempt to dethrone God. What was at stake in these murders was not David's moral wellbeing but the consistency of his faith. Thus when David put these murderers to the sword it was another act of self-abnegation. History had to be God's alone, or else it was meaningless.

Yet this self-abnegation is not found only in the core narrative of David's struggle toward the throne. It is one of the defining characteristics of his life from beginning to end, both in the central body of his story, and in the footnotes. It was by faith that David set aside his destiny to become the servant of an uncircumcised Philistine warlord. As servant of Achish, David was prepared to deny himself even to the point of waging war against Israel, on the side of the Philistine dogs (I Sam 28.1-2).

"You must understand that you and your men will accompany me in the army."

"Then you will see for yourself what your servant can do," David came back.

"Very well," replied Achish. "I will make you my bodyguard *for life*."

What a harrowing sound in the ears of the man to whom the very people of the living God had been promised! Yet David would deny himself even to this extent rather than take his future into his own hands.

Though perhaps this is plausible given his youth, his agility, his perennial uprootedness. Yet the same absence of self-esteem is still very much alive after more than three decades on the throne. David, his family and many of his loyalists are fleeing

Jerusalem in the wake of Absalom's uprising. Out of no concern for his own wellbeing the beleaguered king exhorts Ittai to return to Jerusalem. "Shall I make you wander about with us, when I do not know where I am going? [...] Go back and stay with *King* Absalom. [...] May kindness and faithfulness be with you" (II Sam 15.19-20). Beyond his very paternal concern for this foreigner Ittai, David's self-abnegation knows no limits, already conferring his own rightful title onto his defiant son — *King* Absalom.

Then the king said to Zadok, "Take the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the LORD's eyes, he will bring me back and let me see it and his dwelling place again. But if he says, 'I am not pleased with you,' then I am ready; let him do to me whatever seems good to him." (II Sam 15.25-26)

As ever, David resigns himself to the author of history. There is a God in Israel, and he would keep it that way. Rather than take the presence of the LORD for himself, he would send the Ark back to Jerusalem, for God is not David's God only, but the nation's foremost. And this David, slayer of tens of thousands though he was, never did raise a hand to take the throne of Israel. David understood that it was not the throne of men but of YHWH God. If God would have him in it, so be it. But he cannot take by force what can never belong to him.

How painful it must have been, then, when Shimei cursed him, saying, "Get out, get out, you man of blood, you scoundrel! The LORD has repaid you for all the blood you shed in the household of Saul, in whose place you have reigned" (II Sam 16.7-8). Of course, David responded by refusing to permit bloodshed. Instead, he awaited the vindication of the LORD, should it come. In the meantime, however, as in his youth,

David found himself in exile, clinging to a promise. As a man of self-abnegation, from his youth to his old age, David understood what it meant to be a

Man of Sacrifice. Saul did not understand sacrifice. That much is clear. First we see him sacrificing in order to save his own skin (I Sam 13). The next time we see him, he has brought back plunder from the Amalekites from which he intended to make an offering. David, conversely, understood that an acceptable sacrifice was one that cost something (II Sam 24.24). The command God gave Saul to utterly wipe out the Amalekites and all their livestock was not the gross masochism of a vengeful God. The point was to not take a plunder so that Israel would continue to be a people relying on the hand of God — a people that did not benefit from the unrighteous wealth of other nations. Saul was disobedient, but imagined that by making a sacrifice he could more than make up for it. This is why God rejected Saul and sent Samuel to find David, the Man-After-God's-Own-Heart who would understand that “to obey is better than sacrifice,” who would do unquestioningly what YHWH wanted done. What God was looking for, and what he found in a shepherd boy, was a

Man of Submission. In order to submit to God, one must know the will of God. Six times it is recorded that David specifically “inquired of the LORD” (I Sam 23.2; 23.4; 30.8; II Sam 5.19; 5.23). Each time God gave David a definitive answer, and David obeyed. In the face of uncertainty, David obeyed. Even when all his men were against it, David obeyed. Compare this to the *one time* that Saul inquired of God. God gave him no

answer. God was silent. It is because David knew that to obey is better than sacrifice that God answered him. And it is because Saul did not, that God did not.

David obeyed when the Philistines were attacking Keilah. David obeyed when the Amalekites had raided Ziklag. David obeyed when heathen armies were spread out in the Valley of Rephaim. And perhaps most significantly, David obeyed when the LORD commanded him, "Go up to Hebron." This must have been for him the most difficult command of them all. It had been thirteen long years since David had been given the promise. Year after year, he had lived in exile — he and his people nomads in the desert, warriors against staggering odds, even the servants of Philistine dogs. How distant by now the promise must have been to him. His adversary Saul was now dead, but so too was his companion Jonathan. With such a trail of blood and tears behind him, who could say what lay before him?

Nevertheless, David obeyed the word of the LORD. He went up. "Then the men of Judah came to Hebron and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah" (II Sam 2.4). And as the oil rained down David's ruddy face his tears were carried away in it, and he was reminded that his future was God's history. And the Subject-King was vindicated.