

“The Sword Devours Now One and Now Another”

When Kings Go out to Battle, Some Don't

The saga of the Davidic monarchy takes a decided downturn beginning in 2 Samuel 11, and by chapter 18 has spiraled out of control. Most scholars place this chapter within the larger literary unit known as the “Court History” or “Succession Narrative,” which begins a few chapters earlier and runs through 1 Kings 2. These materials reflect the community wrestling with the question of how royal power will be transferred from David to one of his heirs. It will be remembered that that was not the case with Saul, so there was no precedent for this question. With stunning frankness, chapter 11 begins to focus on the decline of David. Read as a morality play the chapter is shameful. Seen in the light of Deuteronomistic expectations for the status and function of Israel's king, it is damning.

Bathsheba

It's spring. The rains have ceased. The roads are passable. So it's the time of year when “kings go out to battle.” But not David. Once known for his martial prowess, “Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (1 Sam 21:11c), David lingers behind in his capital while the army of Israel engages the enemies of the chosen people. Is he no longer the divinely appointed protector of the people? We learn quickly that David may be lingering behind, but he is not idle. Though the idealized account of David's reign in Chronicles will make no mention of the affair, David, in violation of the Mosaic law (Deut 5:18), and in violation of the trust vouchered in the king as Israel's fore-

Lectionary Loop

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost or
Proper 12, Year B, 2 Samuel
11:1-15

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost or
Proper 13, Year B, 2 Samuel
11:26—12:13a

Proper 6, Year C, 2 Samuel 11:26-
12:10, 13-15

Reflections

Political Promises and Broken Vows

1. How have marital infidelities by modern political leaders affected their credibility in the eyes of their constituents and their ability to govern?
2. How do the (inevitable) lies and cover-up lead to more trouble?
3. Who, besides Bathsheba and David, helped make their deadly affair happen (2 Sam 11)?

most guardian of that law (Deut 17), commits adultery with the lovely Bathsheba.

His plan to hide his act is foiled by Bathsheba's fertility (2 Sam 11:4-5). But fertility is at the heart of the one original command of Yahweh (Gen 1:28) and the covenant promises to Israel's ancestors (Gen 15:5; 17:6). Has David turned blessing into curse? The divinely ordained fecundity of the natural order has made things inconvenient for Yahweh's king, not to mention the incredible violation of Bathsheba, passed over in the text in silence, and the dangerous situation into which David has forced her. So, David now considers other means to cover up his deeds. He raises the stakes. He will call Bathsheba's husband home from the war and send him home for rest and recuperation. Sending soldiers home for R & R is in direct violation of Mosaic law when they are engaged in a military campaign (Deut 23:9-14). David is now fomenting sedition against Yahweh by encouraging Uriah to violate that law (2 Sam 11:11).

By now there aren't that many commandments left to break, but David manages to find another one. He conspires with his military commander to have Uriah, loyal soldier of Israel, slain. David's order and a foreign sword accomplish the deed (2 Sam 11:22-24). The act parallels Saul's worst moment, when he ordered Yahweh's own priests slain at Nob by the hand of Doeg the Edomite, a foreigner obeying the command of Yahweh's king to slay fellow Yahwists (cf. 1 Sam 22:18). Can it get any worse? Yes.

Told of Uriah's death, David as much as assures his military commander that everything will be just fine: David said to the messenger, "Thus you shall say to Joab, 'Do not let this matter [David's treachery? Joab's complicity? Uriah's death?] trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another; press your attack on the city, and overthrow it. . . .' encourage him" (2 Sam 11:25).

David is right, far beyond what he can yet see. A sword, as the following chapters will show, has indeed been unleashed. David cannot foresee or control its appetite. Where will David's wrong lead his house? Where will it lead his people? What does Yahweh think?

Reflections

Can you think of instances where *personal issues* have clouded a national leader's judgment in making the distant calls of war?

Reflections

The Price Of Betrayal

1. At what point did David's interest in Bathsheba move beyond temptation to indiscretion and sin? Suggestion: read James 1:14-15 on the process of temptation.
2. How do those who socially "survive" an extra-marital affair "survive" spiritually?
3. The main character, Anna, in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, seems to have survived socially but deteriorated spiritually. How do the sins of betrayal and falsehood affect the soul? What can be done about it?
4. Suggestion: read Matthew 5:23-24; Luke 19:8 on reconciliation and Ephesians 4:25 on truthfulness. Why would seeking the help of a pastor and professional counselor be important here?