

This week's readings are some of the most interesting in the Deuteronomistic History. I think it is important to provide some "background" that actually depends on what happens in the "future" in that to understand what is happening "now" on the story, you need to know what has happened in the future. Hang in there as I work through this.

The Deuteronomist has a southern (Judah/David/Jerusalem) bias. Knowing this, it is easier to see the Deuteronomist as an apologist for how the story of Israel and its people turned out after the Babylonian exile. This means that arranging the stories from various sources, editing and transitioning those stories in what can appear as a cohesive and chronological order serves a purpose—to provide a literary arrow that points to the way things ended up, with Judah dominant over Israel and Jerusalem being the only place where legitimate worship of God was acceptable.

There are several steps necessary to do this.

- 1—the descendants of Saul have no claim to leadership
- 2—David and his descendants are to rule over Israel. This is according to a new covenant with God
- 3—God works on behalf of David to defeat all enemies and expand the territory under David's control
- 4—Solomon is David's legitimate heir, by hook or by crook

Saul was the first king of Israel. Even though God withdrew his support of Saul, it did not erase history. As I mentioned last week, kingship in the ancient world and throughout history, is an hereditary office, passed from father to eldest son. Even though God turned away from Saul and chose David as king, it did not mean that Saul's tribe, his follow and his sons agreed. This means that every male descendant of Saul posed a potential threat to David's kingship. To secure David's position, it was necessary to remove those potential obstacles from Saul's family and supporters.

Some of Saul's sons had already died, and now we read of how David managed to eliminate the other potential contenders to the throne from Saul's lineage. The only one left is a grandson of Saul, Jonathan's son Meribbael. Meribbael is made irrelevant in two ways: he is injured in an accident and was left permanently crippled. This disability made Meribbael unfit to serve as king, according to cultural standards of that time. But as "insurance" that either Meribbael would not be tempted on his own, or influenced by others, to seek to overthrow David, David reached out to support Meribbael, offering him servants to work his fields and the putting Meribbael at the king's table. This indicated that Meribbael had an alliance with David and enjoyed the King's protection and favor.

There was one other direct connection between David and Saul that the Deuteronomist had to neutralize, Michal, Saul's daughter and David's wife. We meet Michal as David is leading the procession bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. Michal is appalled by David's behavior and she chastised him for it when they met. David's reaction was to banish Michal so that she was childless. While women in the ancient world were judged by their ability to bear children, especially males, because women only had status by their connection to males, there is more to the story here. Any of Michal's sons by David would also have been Saul's grandsons and potential challengers to David to return the kingship to Saul's line. Making Michal childless took care of that.

The story of David's kingship in this section is based on the multiple means of the word "house". A house is a home, a physical place where people live. David tells God he wants to build a house for God, who is currently present to the people in the Ark of the Covenant which resides in a tent. The tent is a symbol of a nomadic people who wandered from place to place and had no permanent location. A house, by contrast, is a permanent structure that denoted stability. God's response to David is that because David wants to build a house (temple) to God, that God will reward David by creating a house for David.

That house was not a building, even a palace for David, but a reference to David's ancestors who would succeed him as king. Royal lineages are referred to as houses. This is the new covenant God makes with David, that his "house" will continue to rule over Israel with God's blessing. David never built the temple, but his offer to do so was enough to establish the covenant.

With David solidly established as king, God supported all the military endeavors he attempted and the size of the nation over which David ruled grew to a huge size. He controlled great wealth and established alliances with other nations that did not want to engage him in war. As part of such victories and alliances, David took wives from the various tribes and nations as was customary of the time.

With his wives and concubines (secondary wives), one would think that David had no need of female companionship outside his household, but that turned out to be wrong. While his armies were at war, David is on his roof and sees a woman bathing. He is entranced and desires her.

Note; Bathsheba is the INNOCENT party here. She does nothing wrong. In fact, the text makes it clear that she is following the law. She was using the mikvah, the ritual bath required by the Law of all women following their menstrual cycle. The purpose of the mikvah was to cleanse the woman so her husband would not be rendered ritually unclean by having intercourse with her. Rainfall in Palestine was very seasonal, October through April (think California, not Alabama) and water was collected on cisterns for bathing throughout the year. The logical place for these cisterns was on the rooftop of a building. Bathsheba was not teasing David. She was behaving in a normal manner. It was David who was out of line. If he had been with his army he would never have seen Bathsheba,

David pursues Bathsheba even though he is told she is married to Uriah the Hittite who is an ally of David, serving in the king's army. David has her brought to him and he has intercourse with her. He was the king, she was the wife of a foreign ally. David bears all the responsibility for the adultery.

Bathsheba becomes pregnant. It is obvious David is the father—she'd been bathing after her menstrual cycle and her husband is on the battlefield. David then plots to have Uriah sent home on furlough, presumably that Uriah will have intercourse with his wife and be assumed to be the father of the baby. Except that Uriah doesn't comply with David's plan. Uriah does not go home but sleeps with the soldiers. His explanation is that while the nation is at war he will act like a soldier at the front. This is an unintentional affront to David.

David then sends Uriah back to the army with a note to Joab, his general. The note tells Joab to put Uriah on the front line where he will be killed by the enemy. The coldness of getting Uriah to deliver his own death sentence is the final insult in the litany of David's sins. (It is doubtful that Uriah knew how to read, but even if he could, it would only demonstrate that Uriah was an honorable man who would not read the note)

Uriah is killed and Bathsheba mourns him. David comforts her and takes her as his wife when the mourning period is over. David looks good for taking care of a warrior's widow, even if she is pregnant, supposedly with the dead warrior's child—who can no longer deny fatherhood. Quite a neatly written story.

Nathan appears as a counselor to David. He does not confront David directly with his sin, but tells David a parable—a story based in a real setting that had an educational message. There is a rich man with limitless resources and a poor man with one ewe lamb. When company comes to the rich man he makes a feast, but he does not choose an animal from his herd. Instead, he takes the one lamb from the poor man and kills it for the dinner. David is outraged by the rich man's behavior, without realizing the story is a parable about HIM! As a result David finds himself guilty of his crime of adultery and determined his own punishment. The child from his adultery dies.

David prayed and fasted while the child was ill, but once the child died, David ceased mourning and ate. He accepted God's will. Then he comforted Bathsheba and had intercourse with her. The child they conceived was Solomon,

What are your impressions of this week's readings?

What do you think of David's character?

How does reading the story of David and Bathsheba differ from what you have heard in the past—or seen in the movie?

What do you think of the Deuteronomist as a historian and author?

Shalom,
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