

SBL Annual Meeting Papers, November 2006

For review only; do not distribute

Adrien J. Bledstein
Chicago, IL

David's Rupture with God, Depression, and Recovery

Scholars generally assume that the turning point in David's life was his taking Bathsheba.¹ From my study of Psalms integrated with narrative, I suggest his trauma starts earlier, when he hears YHWH bless him as founder of a dynasty, and that a son of his will build the temple. Disappointment is a more likely cause of David's rupture with God than "uncontrollable sex drive" and "lack of moral restraint."²

After the king brings the Ark to Jerusalem, has respite from enemies, and is settled in his palace, David's aims to fulfil his dream to build a temple. In 2 Samuel 7, "The king said to the prophet Nathan: 'Here I am dwelling in a house of cedar, while the Ark of the YHWH abides in a tent!'" (2 Sam 7:2) Nathan responds: "Go, do whatever you have in mind, for YHWH is with you." (2 Sam 7:3)³ The time has come for David to honor YHWH with a house which also will secure the king's "fame and glory."⁴

To appreciate what building the temple means to David, listen to his prayers prior to this time. He prides himself on living according to the covenant with YHWH in contrast to his enemies whom he curses. That David views himself as an honorable man who deserves the privilege is suggested in several Psalms.⁵

For example, while David is an outlaw because of Saul's obsession to kill him, David has two opportunities to take the life of his oppressor but lets him live. After the first parting David encourages himself with prayer:

For You are not a God who desires wickedness; evil cannot abide with You; wanton men cannot endure in Your sight. You detest all evildoers; You doom those who speak lies; murderous, deceitful men YHWH abhors. Ps 5:5-7

Distinguishing himself from the evildoers, he imagines the future.

But I, through Your abundant love, *will* enter Your house; I *will* bow down in awe at Your holy temple.⁶ (Ps 5:8)

I suggest the anointed one strengthens himself with a vision of the temple he will build when he is king.

Later, before David leads his men to become mercenaries for Philistine King Achish he is tormented by the thought of leaving the land connected with worship of YHWH. He resolves his anguish by praying as if he is a priest: "Take my prayer as an offering of incense, my upraised hands as an evening sacrifice." (Ps 141:2)

After a year with the Philistines, he and his men are relieved from going to war against Israel. They walk three days to Ziklag where they find their families are gone and the city is in ruins. David rallies the troops, they route the Amalekites, reunite with families, and David authors a new law. In exile he again strengthens himself with a vision of the temple he will build. "I *will* bow toward Your holy temple and praise Your name for Your steadfast love and faithfulness." (Ps 138:2) David clearly feels loved by the One he loves.

Though we hear David in prayers open himself to YHWH, we do not hear the Divine speak directly to David, as YHWH spoke to servants Abraham and Moses. David learns his Deity's responses through signs and prophets. So after the ecstasy of leading the procession bringing the Ark to Jerusalem, David feels it is time to build a house for YHWH, and is affirmed by Nathan.

The next morning Nathan conveys a prophecy. With a double entendre, YHWH makes David founder of a house, a dynasty, that will last forever. A son of his will build a house, a temple for God. Imagine David's shock and dismay

That a successor will have that honor is like a slap in the face. Shamed, David's prayer of gratitude is stilted, lacks the luster, the passion of earlier prayers of appreciation.⁷ He struggles to thank YHWH for the gift of dynasty. Over time his frustration turns to anger and rebellion. At odds with his Source of strength, he falters in battle⁸ and remains in Jerusalem when his servants go to war. When he sees his attractive neighbor, learns she is Uriah's wife, he rejects the covenant with YHWH by taking her. As Harold Ellens points out: "Adultery incidentally involves sex, it is first and foremost about breaking a social contract."⁹

Bathsheba's pregnancy was an unintended consequence. In other circumstances pregnancy would be considered a blessing. For David it was the beginning of a curse. Sobered by a life threatening possibility, David takes responsibility to protect the woman's life. He wines and dines Uriah who will not sleep with his wife which would delay his return to battle. David orchestrates his demise.

The king's response to news of Uriah's death marks a mammoth change in David's world view. "The sword always takes its toll" (2 Sam 11:25) is uncharacteristic, a fatalistic platitude David relays through a mediator to comfort Joab who knows his devastating strategy deserves a furious response. David's bromide alerts us to a much deeper disturbance in the king. As consequences unfold his anger is turned inward and he is depressed.

The prophet Nathan conveys Divine displeasure. King David won't die, as he deserves, but will suffer disasters within his household. After reminding David of all that the Divine did for him, God asks: "Why then have you *despised* the command of YHWH and done what which is evil in My sight?" (JPS 2 Sam 12:9) God is clear about David's intent, "you *despised*. Me by taking the wife of Uriah the Hittite." (2 Sam 12:10)

Tragedies that follow—death of the infant, rape of Tamar, death of Amnon, humiliation of royal concubines, death of Absalom—appear as consequences flowing from David’s acting on his rage at YHWH who blessed him with everything except the honor of building the temple.¹⁰

In *Ps 51* David confesses and prays for forgiveness. “Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity, and purify me of my sin; for I recognize my transgressions, and am ever conscious of my sin.” (Ps 51:4-5)

I do not hear compassion or remorse about people affected by his crimes in David’s prayer. “Against You alone have I sinned, and done what is evil in Your sight; so You are just in Your sentence, and right in Your judgment,” (Ps 51:6) He is focused on himself in relationship with YHWH.

Whereas in other prayers David speaks fondly of his mother, now that he acknowledges sin, he shifts blame to her as if calling himself a son-of-a-bitch.¹¹ “Indeed I was born with iniquity; with sin my mother conceived me.” (Ps 51:7)

David feels Divine inspiration drain away, so pleads: “Do not cast me out of Your presence, or take Your holy spirit away from me. Let me again rejoice in Your help; let a vigorous spirit sustain me.” (Ps 51:13-14)

In past difficult circumstances David cajoled God, that he would sing enthusiastic praises. Now he offers to be an ardent model of repentance.

“I will teach transgressors Your ways, that sinners may return to You. Save me from bloodguilt, O God, God, my deliverer, that I may sing forth Your beneficence. YHWH, open my lips, and let my mouth declare Your praise.” (Ps 51:15-16)

He envisions an alternative to the royal priestly ritual in a temple he will never build, “You do not want me to bring sacrifices; You do not desire burnt offerings.” (Ps 51:18) Having royally messed up he reevaluates how he may serve YHWH, “True sacrifice to God is a contrite spirit; God, You will not despise a contrite and crushed heart.” (Ps 51:19) If David thinks his heartfelt prayer will void horrible consequences, he is mistaken.

When the infant born of adultery is ill David humbles himself in *Ps 38*. After the child dies, David is practical and comforts Bathsheba. Another son is born and Bathsheba names him Solomon, which may mean “replacement” or “recompense” for the lost infant.¹² David is joyful as he imagines relief.

“Happy is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered over. Happy the man whom YHWH does not hold guilty, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. As long as I said nothing, my limbs wasted away from my anguished roaring all day long. For night and day Your hand lay heavy on me; my vigor waned as in the summer drought. Then I acknowledged my sin to You; I did not cover up my guilt; I resolved, ‘I will confess my transgressions to YHWH,’ and You forgave the guilt of my sin.” (Ps 32:1- 5)

In prayer David earnestly believes that if he is honest with the Divine he is forgiven for crimes against humans.

For eight years David's sins may appear "covered over."¹³ However, there is a hiatus in narrative and God does not open David's lips in prayers following celebration of Solomon's birth and YHWH's naming the child Jedidiah, "Beloved-of-YaH."

David's slow response to events when the narrative picks up combined with silence suggests the king suffers dysthymia, mild but debilitating chronic depression indicated by fatigue and difficulty making decisions—for a period of nineteen years.¹⁴

Tragedies foretold by Nathan unravel David's family. Initiating disaster, David's eldest son Amnon pretends to be ill. The king sends princess Tamar, who wears a sacred flounced garment, the "coat of many colors," to perform a healing ritual.¹⁵ Amnon rapes her and has her thrown into the street where she bewails her humiliation. On hearing what happened, David represses his anger, doing nothing to punish his son. Two years later, Tamar's brother Absalom avenges the abuse by killing Amnon and flees to his grandfather, king of Geshur.

Joab imagines David's distraction will end with the return of Absalom. The commander hires a clever woman to present a case to David so he will recall Absalom from exile. The king is slow to respond as the woman presses him again and again and again. Gradually he realizes Joab's ruse and honors his commander's urging to bring Absalom home.

Though Absalom returns, the king does not welcome him in court. Absalom fumes for two more years, then burns Joab's fields to demand his attention. Joab's entreaty overcomes David's reluctance to reconcile with his son. For these eleven years we hear no prayers of David, a sign of his feeling cut off from the Divine. Inaction, moral paralysis regarding his children, and absence of prayers suggest David is depressed.

Contemptuous of his father, Absalom greets people at the gate of Jerusalem claiming there is no one to administer justice. On the one hand Absalom is a glad-handing politician. On the other hand, he may well be reflecting the ineffectiveness of David as a king.

Absalom conspires to displace his father, is crowned in Hebron by all Israel, and is marching toward Jerusalem. The punishments foretold seem to be coming to a head. The infant died. The rape of Tamar was followed by the death of Amnon. Now his handsome son Absalom is marching to kill him. After nearly two decades of dejection, the crisis awakens David, reflected in *Ps 69*.

Deliver me, O God, for the waters have reached my neck; I am sinking into the slimy deep and find no foothold; I have come into the watery depths; the flood sweeps me away. I am weary with calling; my throat is dry; my eyes fail while I wait for God. (Ps 69:2-4)

After pleading with YHWH regarding his folly and guilt, David proclaims "My *passion* for Your house *has eaten me up*." (Ps 69:10) He blames unbearable consequences on his zeal to build a temple. He provides a snapshot of how he has behaved and been perceived by others.

The reproaches of those who revile You have fallen upon me. When I wept and fasted, I was reviled for it. I made sackcloth my garment; I became a byword among them. Those who sit in the gate talk about me; I am the taunt of drunkards. (Ps 69:11-13)

He pleads for respite.

As for me, may my prayer come to You, YHWH, at a favorable moment; O God, in Your abundant faithfulness, answer me with Your sure deliverance. Rescue me from the mire; let me not sink; let me be rescued from my enemies, and from the watery depths. (Ps 69:14-15)

Energized by challenge and hope, David is decisive. He leaves Jerusalem but appoints ten of his concubines to take care of the palace.

Descending from his city, the king meets Ittai, the Gittite, who swears allegiance. Crossing the Kidron Valley he encounters the priest Zadok with the Ark and takes this as a sign. "The king said to Zadok, 'Take the Ark of God back to the city. If I find favor with the YHWH, He will bring me back and let me see it and its abode.'¹⁶ And if He should say, 'I do not want you,' I am ready; let Him do with me as He pleases.'" (2 Sam 15:25-26) Nevertheless, he instructs Zadok to spy on Absalom.

On hearing that his trusted counselor Ahitophel favors Absalom, David's dormant righteous indignation is rekindled and he prays Ahitophel's counsel will be overturned. In *Ps 55*, regarding treachery of a former friend.

"It is not an enemy who reviles me -- I could bear that; it is not my foe who vaunts himself against me -- I could hide from him; ... but it is you, my equal, my companion, my friend." (Ps 55:13-14)

In *Ps 41:5* David pleads: "YHWH, have mercy on me, heal me, for I have sinned against You." He imagines happiness and longs for Divine mercy. Bareheaded, bare foot and weeping he ascends Mount of Olives. At the summit, as if in answer to David's prayer, Hushai meets him. David instructs his friend to enter Absalom's court, to confound Ahitophel's advice.

Descending, David is approached by Ziba, servant of Mephibosheth, son of Jonathan, who alleges his master, is plotting to be king. David gives him his master's property. A Benjaminite hurls curses and stones at the king. David restrains his men, "Perhaps the YHWH will look upon my punishment and recompense me for the abuse *Shimei* has uttered today." (2 Sam 16:12)

As Absalom enters Jerusalem and considers his next move with advice from Ahitophel then Hushai, David and followers arrive safely west of the river Jordan. Advised by Ahitophel, grandfather of Bathsheba, Absalom asserts his ascendance by publicly having sexual intercourse with his father's concubines. Like his half-brother Amnon, Absalom of his own free will consummated part of David's humiliation.¹⁷

Following Hushai's flattering advice instead of Ahitophel's, Absalom is inspired by a vision of himself leading an overwhelming force against his father. Understanding Absalom's folly, Ahitophel commits suicide.

On hearing of the delay in Absalom's plans, David again believes God is with him (Ps 3:1-9).¹⁸ After that long day of walking they cross the Jordan river at night. David sings God's praises in Ps 86, proclaims his steadfast love, and asks for a sign that God is with him. Barzillai and others with provisions and hospitality appear to be an answer to this prayer.¹⁹

After so many positive signs, David is hopeful. Then the death of Absalom unleashes David's grief, pent up for nearly two decades.²⁰ In Ps 39 he privately vents his rage at Joab, then obeys his commander, praises his troops, and dispenses justice as he returns to Jerusalem.

A year later, 67 years old, David is a broken man, chilled and impotent, unable to rise from his bed. A beautiful young woman is not the answer to his prayer, *Ps 31*. Certain that David is dying, Joab supports Adonijah to succeed David.

Nathan and Bathsheba orchestrate an opportunity for David to choose Solomon (Jedidiah, "beloved-of-YaH") as successor. On hearing that Adonijah, Joab and Abiathar set him aside, David rallies and prays for God's support (Ps 70 & 71). Accepting YHWH's choice of the one who will build the temple, David's inner conflict is resolved. He gives Solomon the kingship, survives another three years and advises the young king on how to secure the kingdom by being "wise" regarding those who betrayed David.

A darling of God, David rejects the limit to his aspirations. When the pivot of David's life is seen as his excessive expectation that he would build a temple, what follows is tragedy for Uriah, the royal family, and nation. Like the Pharaoh of Exodus, David and others suffer consequences of a powerful man's arrogant defiance of YHWH. However David lives to see YHWH's will accomplished and experiences some peace.

Endnotes

1. For example: "The story of David and Bathsheba and its immediate aftermath, are the great turning point of the whole David story, as both Sternberg and Polzin have duly observed, and it seems as though the writer has pulled out all the stops of his remarkable narrative art in order to achieve a brilliant realization of this crucially pivotal episode." Robert Alter, *The David Story* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999) p. 249 Other recent publications on the David narratives: Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Hidden Book in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998); Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001); Stephen L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Robert Pinsky, *The Life of David Jewish Encounters* (New York: Nextbook, Schocken, 2005); Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) and *David and the Deuteronomist* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Joel Rosenberg, *King and Kin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Sternberg, Meir, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). For Psalms integrated with narrative, see forthcoming, A. Bledstein, "David at the Cave of Adullam, Depression and Hypergraphia," J. Harold Ellens, ed, *A Life in Bible Study: Its Critical Consequences: Essays in Honor of Bruce M. Metzger*. For other efforts see Charles Knox, *David the King with a Study of the Location of the Psalms in the Order of David's Life* (New York: Randolph, 1875) is a wonderful construction of the stories, evoking visual images of the landscape, family, history, biblical tradition. Jim Jordon, *David His Life and Psalms* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 1989). Jordon focuses on connections with Jesus. I found several partial efforts online: Jeff Asher, "The Psalms of David." Dr. Winn at www.sbl.org presents a chronology which includes 16 of David's psalms with the narrative. Rose McKinley <http://members.tripod.com/~rosemck1/bible.html>. J. Clinton McCann, Jr, raises interesting questions in his paper: "Toward a Non-Retaliatory Lifestyle: Are the Psalms a Help or a

Hindrance?" SBL 2004 <http://www.hsutx.edu/academics/logsdon/cebig/ab04-cm.pdf> . A musical integrating David's life with songs (not Psalms) is entertaining: Alan Menken & Tim Rice, "King David," Highlights from the Live Performance, CD, May 17, 1997.

2. Jonathan Kirsch, *King David: The Real Life of the Man Who Ruled Israel* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000) 189.

3. David does not "inquire," as Baruch Halperin imagines. p 337. Translation is TNK unless otherwise noted. My translation appears in italics.

4. 1 Chronicles 22:5

5. After he was anointed, ^{TNK} **Psalm 26:1-12** "Of David. Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked without blame; I have trusted in the LORD; I have not faltered. ² Probe me, O LORD, and try me, test my heart and mind; ³ for my eyes are on Your steadfast love; I have set my course by it. ⁴ I do not consort with scoundrels, or mix with hypocrites; ⁵ I detest the company of evil men, and do not consort with the wicked; ⁶ I wash my hands in innocence, and walk around Your altar, O LORD, ⁷ raising my voice in thanksgiving, and telling all Your wonders. ⁸ O LORD, I love *the abode of Your* house, the dwelling-place of Your glory. ⁹ Do not sweep me away with sinners, or *snuff out* my life with murderers, ¹⁰ who have schemes at their fingertips, and hands full of bribes. ¹¹ But I walk without blame; redeem me, have mercy on me! ¹² My feet are on level ground. In assemblies I will bless the LORD." "I love *the abode of Your* house" My translation.

6. TNK translates present tense, however the Hebrew indicates future.

7. Compare 2 Sam 7:18-29 to Psalms 9, 15, 133, 16, 101, 20, which express David's sense of triumph and gratitude before David hears he will not build the temple.

8. 2 Sam 21:15-17 Chronologically this comes before Bathsheba.

9. J. Harold Ellens, *Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration* (Westport, Connecticut, London, Praeger, 2006) p. 86.

10. For the importance of honor see Saul M. Olyan, "Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations in Ancient Israel and Its Environment" *JBL* Vol. 115, No. 2 (summer 1996), pp. 201-218.

11. See Psalm 22:10-11 ¹⁰ "You drew me from the womb, made me secure at my mother's breast. ¹¹ I became Your charge at birth; from my mother's womb You have been my God."; Psalm 35:14 "I walked about as though it were my friend or my brother; I was bowed with gloom, like one mourning for his mother."; Psalm 86:16 "Turn to me and have mercy on me; grant Your strength to Your servant and deliver the son of Your maidservant." ; Psalm 139:11-16 "¹¹ If I say, "Surely darkness will conceal me, night will provide me with cover," ¹² darkness is not dark for You; night is as light as day; darkness and light are the same. ¹³ It was You who created my conscience; You fashioned me in my mother's womb. ¹⁴ I praise You, for I am awesomely,

wondrously made; Your work is wonderful; I know it very well. ¹⁵ My frame was not concealed from You when I was shaped in a hidden place, knit together in the recesses of the earth. ¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed limbs; they were all recorded in Your book; in due time they were formed, to the very last one of them.”; Ps 116:16 “O LORD, I am Your servant, Your servant, the son of Your maidservant; You have undone the cords that bound me.” Psalm 131:2 “but I have taught myself to be contented like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child am I in my mind.”

12. Halpern, p. 37. If as Halpern suggests Solomon, named by his mother, means “replacement” or “recompense” for her dead infant, in a double entendre it could also mean the child will replace David.

13. Through Nathan, YHWH names Solomon Jedidiah, “Beloved of Yah.” The name served, on the one hand, to bless the child and to confirm the innocence of Bathsheba who was taken by the king. On the other hand, the name Jedidiah for a child who may supplant him David may understand as an expression of Divine displeasure with himself. When he was at war before his crimes, in Psalms 60:3 and 108:7 he felt he was one of those whom YHWH loved. David might recognize this name given to his son as a sign that he has lost favor as a “beloved of Yah.”

14. “Dysthymic disorder (abbreviated as DD) is chronic low-grade depression. To qualify for the diagnosis of dysthymic disorder, a person must have been feeling depressed for at least two years. In practice, people often after have suffered from dysthymic symptoms for twenty or thirty years or more before seeking treatment!” <http://www.depressionny.com/q&a.htm>

15. Bledstein, A. "Tamar and the `Coat of Many Colors'" Samuel and Kings, A Feminist Companion to the Bible, ed. A. Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 2/7:65-83; A. Bledstein "Was Habbiryā a Healing Ritual Performed by a Woman in King David's House?" Biblical Research, 1992, 37:5-31

16. **טַבְּרַק** is a nomadic dwelling place, the Tabernacle as distinct from Temple.

17. R. Alter, The David Story (New York, London: W.W. Norton, 1999) summarizes “double causation” p 289 f: “deft manifestation of the system of double causation that Gerhard von Rad and others after him have attributed to the David narrative: everything in the story is determined by it human actors, according to the stringent dictates of political realism; yet simultaneously, everything is determined by God, according to a divine plan in history.”

18. ^{TNK} **Psalm 3:1-9** “A psalm of David when he fled from his son Absalom. ² O LORD, my foes are so many! Many are those who attack me; ³ many say of me, "There is no deliverance for him through God." Selah. ⁴ But You, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, He who holds my head high. ⁵ I cry aloud to the LORD, and He answers me from His holy mountain. Selah. ⁶ I lie down and sleep and wake again, for the LORD sustains me. ⁷ I have no fear of the myriad forces arrayed against me on every side. ⁸ Rise, O LORD! Deliver me, O my God! For You slap all my enemies in the face; You break the teeth of the wicked. ⁹ Deliverance is the LORD's; Your

blessing be upon Your people!”

19. David first sang Ps 86 when on the run from Saul. They were on opposite sides of a rock when Saul was suddenly called away to fight the Philistines. Each time David’s prayer is answered.

20. See Dale Launderville, *Piety and Politics: The Dynamics of Royal Authority in Homeric Greece, Biblical Israel, and Old Babylonian Mesopotamia* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002) “The reader of 2 Samuel is led to believe that the depth of David’s anguish would have arisen at least in part from his recognition of the negative circumstances that had beset his royal household since the time he had taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite as his wife (2 Sam 12:11). Here he would have recognized that Absalom’s rebelliousness was not simply of his own doing but part of a larger divinely supported order in which the consequences for misdeeds had to be borne.” p. 277 and footnote 159, “The fourfold restitution took the form of the deaths of four of David’s sons: the child born of the union with Bathseba (2 Sam. 12:18), Amnon (2 Sam. 28-29), Absalom (2 Sam. 18:15; 19:1), and Adonijah.(1 Kings 2:24-25) (J. P. M. Walsh, S.J., private communication.)” p. 277. As David did not live to see the death of Adonijah, I suggest the rape of Tamar was a disaster for David. She like Joseph wore the coat of many colors, the garment of a favorite child, was sent by her father as Joseph was to see to the welfare of a brother, and each was abused. In effect, Tamar was the “one ewe lamb,” whose slaughter by the rich man in Nathan’s case made David so angry. When his dear one suffered humiliation, David recognized further fallout from his crimes and he was depressed, did nothing.