



# ONE NATION UNITED UNDER ONE KING

SERIES: ASCENDING THE THRONE

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2 Samuel 4:1-5:5

Ninth Message

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*What Child is this, who, laid to rest,  
On Mary's lap is sleeping?  
Whom angels greet with anthem sweet,  
While shepherds watch are keeping?*

The words of the beloved Christmas carol, *What Child Is This?* give beautiful expression to the awe that we feel at this time of year. What Child is this who gathered angels, shepherds and kings to a lowly cave in the city of David? What would be his task? And how would he accomplish it? If we do not know the answers to these questions, then we do not know our own purpose in life.

In the gospel of Luke, this Child of whom we sing is identified as the "Son of David"—King David's greater Son. In the New Testament, the name "David" is mentioned thirty-five times. David's title, "Messiah," is used fifty-three times of Jesus, as is the title "King." On seven occasions, the titles "David" and "Messiah" are linked in the same verse. The point is obvious: Apart from the David story, the Christmas story cannot be understood.

In our studies in the life of David we come now to the climactic point as David is crowned king over all Israel. Actually, this is David's third anointing as messiah king. The first took place in his teens, when the prophet Samuel anointed him in the seclusion of his home and in the presence of his brothers. With that anointing came great power over Israel's enemies. But it also gave rise to the jealousy of Saul, the reigning king, who forced David out of the royal court to live in a wretched wilderness for perhaps as many as ten years. There in that Judean wasteland of wadis and caves, David became Israel's sacred poet, penning prayers and singing songs of faith. There, in the school for kings, the weakened David learned the power of prayer. At last, in the providence of God, Saul died, and in a second anointing, all of Judah anointed David king, in Hebron. But it took seven more years before all Israel was ready to give up the old Sauline loyalties and negotiate peace with David.

So the task to unite the nation under one king was a long and arduous one. And, ironically, the greatest threat to unification came not from those who opposed it, but from those who tried to speed it along with misdirected zeal, those who crossed the sacred line of trusting God to grant the kingdom as a gift and instead tried to violently seize it with impatient hands stained red with blood. In our text today, David's soul is vexed with pain. Before he can enjoy his coronation, he is

forced to deal with yet another needless assassination. Once more, innocent blood is shed in "the cause" of the kingdom, putting its reputation in jeopardy yet again.

The story, from the book of 2 Samuel, has three movements. The first movement (4:1-7), tells the story of the assassination of Ish-bosheth, Israel's puppet king; the second movement (4:8-12) sets out David's severe punishment on the perpetrators of the crime. (Due to his quick and decisive action, he is able to keep peace negotiations with Israel intact.) Finally, in the climactic third movement of the story (5:1-5), all Israel comes to David to crown him as king over a united nation.

## I. David's Rule Threatened With Blood Guilt (4:1-7)

**Now when [Ish-bosheth,] Saul's son heard that Abner had died in Hebron, he lost courage [his hands fell limp], and all Israel was disturbed [aghast]. And Saul's son had two men who were commanders of bands: the name of the one was Baanah and the name of the other Rechab, sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, of the sons of Benjamin (for Beeroth is also considered part of Benjamin, and the Beerothites fled to Gittaim, and have been aliens there until this day).**

**Now Jonathan, Saul's son, had a son crippled in his feet. He was five years old when the report of Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel, and his nurse took him up and fled. And it happened that in her hurry to flee, he fell and became lame. And his name was Mephibosheth.**

**So the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, Rechab and Baanah, departed and came to the house of Ish-bosheth in the heat of the day while he was taking his midday rest. And they came to the middle of the house as if to get wheat, and they struck him in the belly; and Rechab and Baanah his brother escaped. [The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, gives a better translation of v 6 than the Massoretic Text: And, behold the porter of the house had winnowed wheat; she had fallen asleep and was dozing, and the brothers Rechab and Baanah, sneaked inside.] Now when they came into the house, as he was lying on his bed in his bedroom, they struck him and killed him and beheaded him. And they took his head and traveled by way of the Arabah all night. (NASB)**

The story opens with Ish-bosheth's reaction to Ab-

ner's death. To symbolize his impotence, Ish-bosheth's name is suppressed twice by the narrator. "Though Ish-bosheth could not tolerate Abner while he lived, he ceased to exist without him so 'his hands fell limp,' he lost his grip on power" (Brueggemann). Israel's reaction is one of horror. All the tribes are aghast. They had been convinced by Abner, their strong military man, that unification with this new king of Judah, Ish-bosheth, was in their best national interest, and now the king is murdered beneath the very shadow of David's throne.<sup>1</sup> We wonder whether, in the midst of this somber mood of death, fear and horror, that throne can be rescued from this terrible blood guilt.

But the narrator keeps us in suspense with two digressions, the first concerning the sons of Rimmon, the second, concerning a son of Jonathan. These sons of Rimmon, who hailed from Beeroth and served in Ish-bosheth's army, will become the architects of yet another assassination. Like the Amalekite who claimed to have killed Saul, they regard assassination as an opportunity for advancement in David's new kingdom.

They are introduced, first, by what they do, and second, by where they come from. Both their occupations and origins are veiled in ambiguity, however. Their occupation, "commanders of bands," could mean either platoon commanders or some other high ranking military order, or it could mean that they were merely gang leaders, imperial thugs hired to carry out the state's dirty work. As to their origins, were they Canaanites, as were the original inhabitants of Beeroth, according to verse 3? No, we learn, these men were true Benjaminites, which would align them with Saul's tribe and family. This would lead us to expect them to be loyal, as the men of Jabesh were loyal to Saul. Given this second piece of information, we might expect they were "platoon leaders," and thus we are not prepared for the events which are about to unfold.

The second digression concerns Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth. (His name rhymes with Ish-bosheth: "man of shame" vs. "he scatters shame"). When the report of Saul's and Jonathan's deaths is made to a certain unnamed nurse, she picks up the little boy to flee. Tragically, in the confusion the boy falls and becomes lame in his feet. (The reason this information is given in the narrative doesn't become clear until the end of the story.)

So the two sons of Rimmon, Rechab and Baanah, step out on their own initiative to pursue their own interests. They leave their city and arrive at the house of Ish-bosheth in mid-afternoon. It is hot, and the king is taking a nap. Verse 6 is confusing when read as it stands, and doesn't fit chronologically with verse 7. Scholars who feel the Hebrew text of this verse is corrupted offer the Greek translation of the OT as the preferred reading:

**And, behold the porter of the house had winnowed wheat; she had fallen asleep and was dozing, and**

**the brothers Rechab and Baanah, sneaked inside.**<sup>2</sup>

This makes better sense to the development of the story, and imparts a balance of two women in the account, a recurring theme in the narrative of 2:1-5:5. "Their contributions are, in themselves, unfortunate. In her haste to flee with Mephibosheth, the wet nurse has the terrible misfortune of crippling Jonathan's little boy, and the porter, when it is her turn, is unable, through tiredness, to help her master, Ish-bosheth, by sounding the alarm."<sup>3</sup>

The brothers slip inside the house undetected, and find the king lying fast asleep on his bed. Making use of three quick verbs, the narrator says they strike him, kill him, and decapitate him. The deed is done. Ish-bosheth, the sleeping ruler, a pitiful portrait, impotent when he is bereft of his strong man, is now "three times dead" (Brueggemann). The assassins depart the scene without a hitch, and travel all night through the Arabah to Hebron. What a stark contrast to the loyal Jabeshites who walked all night and crossed the Jordan to honor the body of Saul. In their hands the brothers carry a severed head, their trophy of triumph, which they hope will gain a good price in Hebron. But, just as the Amalekite messenger, that infamous stranger (*ger*), did not know the heart of the king, neither do these two Benjaminites, whose betrayal is far more serious.

The scene presents a visual portrait of a decimated kingdom. The hands of Ish-bosheth are limp, an image of fear; the legs of his nephew are crippled, a sign of impotence; the image of his severed head leaves us in speechless horror. The head of the Sauline state has been beheaded, the dynasty crippled.

How will King David receive these mercenaries who strike, kill and decapitate?

## II. David's Vengeance On the Perpetrators (4:8-12)

**Then they brought the head of Ish-bosheth to David at Hebron, and said to the king, "Behold, the head of Ish-bosheth, the son of Saul, your enemy, who sought your life; thus the Lord has given my lord the king vengeance this day on Saul and his descendants."**

**And David answered Rechab and Baanah his brother, sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, and said to them, "As the Lord lives, who has redeemed my life from all distress, when one told me, saying, 'Behold, Saul is dead,' and thought he was bringing good news, I seized him and killed him in Ziklag, which was the reward I gave him for his news. How much more, when wicked men have killed a righteous man in his own house on his bed, shall I not now require his blood from your hand, and destroy you from the earth?" Then David commanded the young men, and they killed them and cut off their hands and feet, and hung them up beside the pool in Hebron. But they took the head of Ish-bosheth**

**and buried it in the grave of Abner in Hebron.**

The eager sons of Rimmon waste no time in presenting their trophy to the king. Then they try to back their bloodthirsty act with a theological justification, saying, "It is Yahweh who is avenged!" They speak as if it were God (they use God's personal name, which is almost transformed into blasphemy) who had given vengeance, and that they were merely the holy instruments of the divine will. Fokkelman says that this "is the siren's song of enmity and vengeance which is all to well known to us—and David."<sup>4</sup>

David reacts immediately with heated, holy zeal. His first concern is to rescue God's name from these murderers and rebuke them for their blasphemous theology. And his first words subvert their last words: "*As the Lord lives, who has redeemed my life from all distress.*" It is the living God who redeems, not men, and when he does so, there is no compromise of holy ethics.

David reminds the brothers of the unfortunate messenger who came to him at Ziklag. When a stranger, an Amalekite, arrived from the field of battle with what he thought was good news, the death of Saul and two of his sons, he paid with his own blood. How much more would these men of wickedness pay for killing a man of righteousness (a word play with Ish-bosheth: "man of shame," *ish-tzadiq*, "a man of righteousness"). And their deed was done not on the field of battle, but in the privacy of the man's home, when he was asleep, armorless and defenseless. They claimed their victim was seeking David's life, but now David has to seek their blood and purge them from the land. In this he is complying with the law (Deut 19:13; 21:9), which says that crimes like this are so vile, the criminal must be shown no pity lest an entire community be affected by the consequences of blood guilt. The land must be purged.

The men are summarily executed, with no appeal. Their hands and feet, the instruments which severed the head of Ish-bosheth, are amputated—an echo of Ish-bosheth's limp hands and Mephibosheth's crippled feet. Their final punishment is to be hung in public, thus exposing what they did in secret. In contrast, the head of Ish-bosheth is given a decent burial in the grave of Abner, in Hebron. Hebron actually became the burying ground for all of David's opponents. They may have been threats to him in life, but they are honored in death.

Miraculously, due to David's swift, decisive action, the men's heinous crime does not hold up the peace process, as we will see in the third movement.

### III. David Anointed King Over All Israel (5:1-5)

**Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, "Behold, we are your bone and your flesh. Previously [lit. "yesterday and the day before yesterday"], when Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel out and in. And the Lord said to you, 'You will shepherd My people Israel, and**

**you will be a ruler over Israel.'" So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, and King David made a covenant with them before the Lord at Hebron; then they anointed David king over Israel. David was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned forty years. At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months, and in Jerusalem he reigned thirty-three years over all Israel and Judah.**

At last, the historic moment has arrived. All Israel comes to David to make him king over them. Finally, there is but one king uniting the one nation, Israel. No one is coerced, no political deals are struck. All Israel longs to be joined to this new king—in the language of a bride yearning for her new husband, "bone of your bone and flesh of your flesh." Israel's public vows give voice to the hidden longings that had been true in her heart all along: Even when Saul reigned, David was the true leader—and it was the Lord who decreed it so.

But Israel's eagerness is tempered with caution. The nation's understanding of the office of king had grown considerably since the days of their naive euphoria at Saul's coronation. Then they said, "Give us a king like all the other nations," and Saul was given a blank check. Now, after decades of suffering under a self-serving despot, and numerous examples of betrayal in high places, David's kingship is endorsed only in the form of a covenant of mutual acceptance. "Shepherd" becomes the defining term of office. The shepherd lives for the well being of the flock, not the other way around. He is responsible to feed, nurture and care for them. And the best shepherds will even die for their flock (compare Ezekiel 34 and John 10). The second term, "ruler" (*nagid*) speaks of the king providing military protection for the flock (Fokkelman), and makes room for the kingship of the Lord, to whom the king is ultimately subject.

So here is David's third anointing. It is the culmination of a long journey which he began as a boy shepherding sheep. Now he becomes the shepherd of an entire nation. But it is equally the story of a nation who, through the pain of wrong choices, has come to learn what the work of a true king is all about. The concept of dictator is transformed to shepherd. And it is God's story. In his sovereignty, God brings both people and king together at the proper time, to be wed in a covenant of loyal-love. The shepherd and his people are finally one.

### IV. David's Coronation Psalm

The seven years David had spent reigning over Judah taught him much about his identity as king and how he should go about the work of unifying the nation. During those long years, David did not take any initiative to gain the throne; it was the pure gift of God. Yet over that same time period, David officiated at three funerals in Hebron, where men who sought with violence to grasp the throne, were put to death. These violent acts, which almost disqualified the king from office, made a

huge impact on his soul.

So that the lesson he learned would not be forgotten, David wrote Psalm 2, the "Oath of Office" for every king of Israel, to be read on the day of their coronation. At the center of the psalm the king gives a statement of his faith, his personal pledge of how he plans to implement God's rule on earth:

**I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord;  
He said to Me, "You are my Son,  
Today I have begotten You."  
Ask of me, and I will surely give the nations as  
Your inheritance,  
And the very ends of the earth as Your possession  
(Ps 2:7-8).**

The king takes his oath of office by rehearsing the "decree of the Lord" regarding his identity as king. The day of his coronation marked the beginning of a new relationship with God, where he was now adopted as a "son." (This was the origin of the title "Son of God," 2 Sam 7:14-15.) Inherent in the gift of sonship was the special privilege of prayer to his Father. David's legacy thus served as a reminder to every future king to use prayer as the chief vehicle to bring God's rule from heaven to earth. No coercion, politicking, lobbying, or any violent means were to be used to implement God's rule on earth.

So we find these very words from Psalm 2, "This is my Son," echoing from heaven at Christ's baptism. At the outset of his ministry, therefore, Jesus is reminded that prayer would be his chief weapon in his task of uniting all Israel (and the nations as well) under his rule. Not once did Jesus succumb to worldly methods of violent coercion or political manipulation. And to en-

sure that his followers did the same, we find the leaders in the Jesus story taking the blood guilt of others in their innocent bodies. John the Baptist took on the role of Ish-bosheth, and was beheaded. Jesus served the sentence of the violent murderers in the story. Just as the criminals were executed for their blood guilt, their hands and feet cut off and their bodies publicly strung up, so our Lord gave himself over to Deuteronomy's worst curse—public hanging on a tree, with outstretched hands and feet pierced, "with wounds so deep, yet draws me near." The result of such holy actions is that those who come to be ruled by him, come with the heartfelt yearnings of a bride to her new husband. Freely they turn their lives over to the Great Shepherd who died, that they might live. As so the story continues through time, for all time, until at last, every knee shall bow and tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord.

*Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen (Hebrews 13:20-21).*

1 I am greatly indebted to the excellent work of J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. III, Throne and City*, (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 121-149, for many of my observations on this text.

2. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 126.
3. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 127.
4. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 130.

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