



DAVID'S FINAL DESCENT: USED AND ABUSED

SERIES: *THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING*

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2 Samuel 16:1-14

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Growing up as the only boy in a four-sibling household, I loved to go on trips with men. Camping, fishing, hunting trips—I would do anything just to be with men. But I discovered that one can go on a journey with a man and yet never really get “inside” him. Elie Wiesel took a traumatic journey to a Nazi concentration camp with his father, and watched him die there. Yet in the first line of his memoirs, the survivor of the Holocaust writes:

I never really knew my father. It hurts to admit that, but it would hurt him even more if I deluded myself. The truth is, I knew little of the man I loved most in the world, the man whose merest glance could stir me. What was the secret of his inner life? What was he thinking as he stared in silence at some far-off, invisible point in space?¹

It is a privilege to journey alongside a man, but it is an even greater privilege to travel inside him, to see and touch the deepest parts of his soul, especially when he is at that holy crossroads when he becomes a man of God.

That rare sense of privilege resounds in my heart this morning as we come to our text in the David story. This detailed account of a journey from Jerusalem to the desert is a no holds barred revelation of the reconstruction of David's soul. We are permitted to enter in on everything that occurs in his long process of restoration. Nothing is hidden from the reader's curious eye: the humiliating egress through Jerusalem in the face of the ghastly stares of the populace; the sense of shame as David exits the city with the refuse; the loud weeping of a nation grieving with him; his clothes of sorrow draped in dust and ripped in mourning; and then the surprise of certain figures embracing him with costly love. The committed faces of these figures give us sudden visions of Jonathan risen from the dead. Their tender touches of sacred loyalty give David's soul the energy to make the ascent up the Mount of Olives to the place where God is met, encountered and worshipped. This is a mountain-top experience in every sense of the word, one that is coupled with a vision of restoration.

But, like most things in life, the vision of triumph is followed by more humiliation. Before David will be fully restored he has to make another descent. On the way he will come under vicious attack from two members of the family of Saul: Ziba, the servant of Mephibosheth, and Shimei, the son of Gera. David is used by one and abused by the other. At the lowest point in his life, he is taken advantage of and trampled in the dust. The story would be comical if it were not so real to life. Mountain-top experiences are momentary at best. Oftentimes they are followed by downward journeys into the valley of the shadow. Restoration requires tenacious determination to go on, no matter what the cost; and that is what David does.

In this steep descent we discover the most pleasing puri-

fication for David's soul.

I. Ziba: Deceptive Generosity (16:1-4)

Now when David had passed a little beyond the summit, behold, Ziba the servant of Mephibosheth met him with a couple of saddled donkeys, and on them were two hundred loaves of bread, a hundred clusters of raisins, a hundred summer fruits, and a jug of wine. And the king said to Ziba, “Why do you have these?” And Ziba said, “The donkeys are for the king's household to ride, and the bread and summer fruit for the young men to eat, and the wine, for whoever is faint in the wilderness to drink.” Then the king said, “And where is your master's son?” And Ziba said to the king, “Behold, he is staying in Jerusalem, for he said, “Today the house of Israel will restore the kingdom of my father to me.”” So the king said to Ziba, “Behold, all that belongs to Mephibosheth is yours.” And Ziba said, “I prostrate myself; let me find favor in your sight, O my lord, the king!” (NASB)

David's descent down the mountain and his meetings with Ziba and Shimei are the counterparts to his meetings with Zadok and Hushai on his earlier ascent up the Mount of Olives. His first encounter on this occasion is with Ziba. This is the man who, when he was commanded by David to serve Jonathan's only heir, the cripple Mephibosheth, was overcome with jealousy and resentment. Ever since that day he has been plotting, circling like a vulture, awaiting the moment when he could seize his master's estate. Now, when David is most vulnerable, Ziba sees his opportunity. How often does it happen that when people are at their most vulnerable, the vultures descend and devour their prey?

Ziba intersects David's path just after the king has had his encounter with Hushai and received the dreaded news that Ahithophel had joined Absalom's conspiracy. So with the stinging memory of betrayal fresh in David's memory, Ziba arrives clothed in the mask of a loyal servant. He surprises David with an array of generous gifts and provisions—donkeys, bread, raisins, fruit, wine—enough to feed an army. On closer examination, the arrangement of these gifts is so similar to the arrangement that Abigail presented David when she intercepted him for his good (1 Sam 25:18), that one senses it is a result of deliberate design. Ziba presents himself as a the “new” Abigail, in the shadow of her memory and all that she evoked in David. Only after the inspection of these gifts, and the granting of the king's favor which Ziba had won, does David ask, “Where is Mephibosheth?” Ziba parts with the information that he has been longing to release, betraying his master with a slanderous lie: “Mephibosheth is staying in Jerusalem, thinking the house of Israel will *return* the kingdom of my father to me.” What stinging words to a man who

has just been betrayed by another son! Ari Cartun writes: “[Ziba] is bringing a bribe and a slander to ingratiate himself to a man who would overreact to a tale of Mephibosheth’s disloyalty, being as he is in the grip of Absalom’s disloyalty.”²

Tired and vulnerable, and pressed between twin memories of generosity and betrayal, David is thoroughly taken in. Without further investigation he reacts to the tale of deception with a snap decision: “All that belongs to Mephibosheth is yours.” Only after Ziba gets the material possessions that he wants does he bow in homage. This gesture is a dead giveaway of his insincerity, but to David, blinded by betrayal, it goes unnoticed.

How depraved, to take advantage of an exiled king when his soul is gripped by mourning and betrayal! How treacherous, to give gifts that are designed to disinherit the innocent! Ziba is a forerunner to Judas, who for a few coins betrayed our Lord in his darkest hour. If this has been your experience, know that these are well trodden, sacred steps for the soul. David, none the wiser, with faulty judgment, continues his descent, “while fleeing from one who is disloyal, he has blindly abetted another who is disloyal.”³

We come now to David’s encounter with Shimei.

II. Shimei: A Storm of Criticism (16:5-14)

When King David came to Bahurim, behold, there came out from there a man of the family of the house of Saul whose name was Shimei, the son of Gera; he came out cursing continually as he came. And he threw stones at David and at all the servants of King David; and all the people and all the mighty men were at his right hand and at his left. And thus Shimei said when he cursed, “Get out, get out, you man of bloodshed, and worthless fellow! [McCarter translates: “you bloodstained fiend from hell!”] The Lord has returned upon you all the bloodshed of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the Lord has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. And behold, you are taken in your own evil, for you are a man of bloodshed!” (16:5-8)

Just when it seemed things could not get any worse, the situation deteriorates further. As David and his men continue their perilous descent down the mountain, to the small village of Bahurim, another Saulide, Shimei, appears on the horizon. This man creates no small commotion as he *comes out*, ranting and raving, swearing endlessly at the top of his voice. Then, to the utter amazement of all, he starts pelting stones at the king and his followers. Fokkelman describes the scene:

The scene thus conjured up is not without humor: this man on his own is waging a war against an entire army! According to the list of objects Shimei has no lack of targets. He is certainly not afraid, he completely disregards the truly present risk that one of his victims may not see the funny side of the rain of stones and curses and will eliminate him at a stroke.⁴

David’s exit from Jerusalem gives Shimei occasion to vent “a poisonous and savage rage”⁵ that he has harbored since David was anointed king in place of Saul. Now Shimei rejoices in David’s misfortune. Harkening back to the brutal murders of Abner and Ishbosheth, the accusation

that he hurls in the midst of his abuse is that David is a man of bloodshed. David has been guilty of many things in his life, but ironically, this was not one of them. He had nothing to do with those murders, and he never once made an illicit reach for Saul’s crown. He had received that as a gift through years of patient waiting and painful persecution. The fact that this self appointed critic attacked the one area of David’s innocence must have burned deeply into the soul of the king. David Roper reflects on this incident in his newest book, noting that criticism often comes when you least deserve it, from those least qualified to give it, and in a form least helpful to receive it!⁶

However, one man in the crowd that day was not about to allow Shimei’s tirade to go unchallenged.

Then Abishai the son of Zeruiah said to the king, “Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over now, and cut off his head.” (16:9)

The sons of Zeruiah could always be counted on for swift, severe action when conflict arose. On the surface, Abishai’s response seems highly orthodox. David, his lord and king, is being wrongly accused in an area in which he is innocent. Further, Shimei not only accuses wrongly, he curses vehemently. The word “curse” (*qalal*: “to treat lightly,” “to treat with contempt”) is used seven times in this text (more times than in any other text in the OT). If cursing parents was a capital offense (Exod 21:17), worthy of the death penalty, how much more deserving of death is cursing the Lord’s anointed!

If that were not enough, lacking either judge or witness, Shimei takes it upon himself to carry out the death penalty—and not just upon David, but his whole army. Add to the injustice Abishai’s love for David, and this son of Zeruiah’s righteous anger certainly appears justified. To these heated emotions, Abishai applies a little theology that seems well suited to the situation. In his view, the whole scene is no different from than the occasion when Goliath cursed the living God. The Philistine giant had sneered at and cursed David when the king was but a youth, saying, “Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?” David, of course, promptly made Goliath a dead dog—and cut off his head into the bargain. So Abishai offers to be God’s man in the gap: “Let me go now, and cut off his head,” he pleads with David.

Some contemporary Christians react in a similar fashion today. They imagine they see things clearly; to them, everything seems black and white. Injustice is present, the correct theology is obvious, so they attack the evil head on with quick, severe strokes to eliminate the wrong that appears embodied in those who attack them. Sadly however, in this encounter, Abishai is no different than Shimei.

Fortunately, David had a different view of the situation. Verse 10:

But the king said, “What have I to do with you, O sons of Zeruiah? If he curses, and if the Lord has told him, ‘Curse David,’ then who shall say, ‘Why have you done so?’” Then David said to Abishai and to all his servants, “Behold, my son who came out from me seeks my life; how much more now this Benjamite? Let him alone and let him curse, for the Lord has told him. Perhaps the Lord will look on my affliction and return good to me instead of his cursing this day.” (16:10-12)

First, David separates and distances himself from Abishai and embraces Shimei's abuse. He knows that Abishai poses a greater threat to his healing process than Shimei. As we have seen all through this journey, sorrow, grief and exile have worked together to heighten David's spiritual sensitivities. At this point, integration is returning to his soul, so that now he sees life in its many dimensions. Thus while Abishai could say, "Consider the source of the criticism. This Shimei is a 'dead dog'", David could respond by saying, "Yes, consider the source." David's faith penetrates beyond the immediate to the true source. He sees a man *coming out*, screaming, "Get out, get out!" But behind the face of the man, David sees an angry son, who *came out* from him, and now seeks his life, just as a once angry David longed to *go out* to seek his son's life. Beyond the face of Shimei, David sees his own angry son; and behind the voice of a son he hears the voice of the Lord.

Yes, integration is returning to David's soul, a spiritual sensitivity that enables him to hear the voice of the Lord in all circumstances. No longer does he need a messenger, like a Nathan or a woman from Tekoa, coming to him in disguise to speak the voice of the Lord. In Shimei's voice he hears the angry voice of his son, and behind that, the voice of the Lord. "Truth is truth," George MacDonald once said, "whether it is spoken by the lips of Jesus or Balaam's ass."⁷

Another factor that has sensitized David is the fact that this event occurs at Bahurim, the place where Michal was forcefully ripped from her husband's arms (2 Sam 3:16).⁸ Though David may not be guilty of seizing the crown, Bahurim reminds him that he is guilty of seizing other things, with the result that many people were left in tears. So behind Shimei's curse David hears the Lord's accusation, and behind the blows he feels the hand of the Lord.

This theology is a very bitter pill to swallow. The only reason we can swallow it is that it comes from the lips of David. But this would not be appropriate counsel to give anyone going into exile, for then we might be guilty of acting like Job's counselors. Only the one who is going through the situation can make these connections. If there has been sin in the past, he or she can say, by faith, "It is the Lord."

In summary, when you are unjustly criticized, do not try to dismiss it based on the source, but try to penetrate beyond the critic to *the* source behind the criticism. If you can be truly humbled by unwarranted abuse, you have entered the graduate school of spirituality. Yet so often we spend much wasted effort defending ourselves. A.W. Tozer writes, "The labor of self-love is a heavy one indeed. Think of yourself whether much of your sorrow has not arisen from someone speaking slightly of you. As long as you set yourself up as a little god to which you must be loyal there will be those who will delight to offer affront to your idol. How then can you hope to have inward peace? The heart's fierce effort to protect itself from every slight, to shield its touchy honor from the bad opinion of friend and enemy, will never let the mind have rest."⁹

The second thing we must learn is how to respond to the criticism. Fokkelman captures the genius of David's reaction in these words:

First, David does not deal directly with Shimei, for David realizes that it is beneath his dignity to argue with

Shimei and that it is a trap for himself to step into Shimei's system...[but by naming the Lord,] David gives a surprisingly new and deep view of the incident ... Shimei's action is a psychic invasion which weighs so heavily that there is practically no more room to see any other side...[by distancing himself from Shimei he can] deal creatively with the stream of filth offered to him...By picking up five words of Shimei's [curse] but creating with them a complete text of his own, David nullifies the poisonous influence of Shimei's curse.¹⁰

David has successfully defused a potential minefield, where a misstep could have proved fatal. With great spiritual sensitivity he transforms Shimei's curse into an opportunity for purification, retribution into forgiveness, and pleasure in the misfortune of others into a hope in the kindness of God who takes pity on our plight. So David the poet embraces the vocabulary of the curse and transforms it into vibrant, life-giving verse. Such is the power of the poem! Surprisingly, he does not pick up the key word of Shimei's speech (*blood*, used three times). In the silence of innocence that word is left alone, for true innocence requires no defense.

This brings us to the last scene. Verse 13:

So David and his men went on the way; and Shimei went along on the hillside parallel with him and as he went he cursed, and cast stones and threw dust at him (dusted him with dust). And the king and all the people who were with him arrived weary and he refreshed himself there. (16:13-14)

So David continues on his way, untouched by Shimei's outburst. But Shimei will not be silenced. He follows David's band along the ridge line that parallels the valley, continuing to vent his curses in every direction, all the while pelting the army with stones. David's refusal to respond only serves to heighten Shimei's rage, for he "dusted them with dust"—an act of extreme frustration. Fokkelman points out that the mention of *parallel lines* is symbolic: that Shimei "is a captive in his own frustrated world and cannot make real contact any more...Parallel lines never meet and the scene ends with a Shimei who is left absolutely alone...[while] David continues on his way."¹¹

At last, David arrives at the fords of the Jordan, at the end of a very long day and a fatiguing march; and at last the army can "pause for breath. The fugitives need fresh air, particularly after the clouds of dust that Shimei stirred up."¹² David has ceased descending. He is as low as he will go. His journey has brought him to the place where he will be fully embraced by God. Thus at the fords of the Jordan he refreshes himself and finds life in a poem and a song. Psalm 3:3-5,

**But Thou, O Lord, art a shield about me,
My glory, and the One who lifts my head.
I was crying to the Lord with my voice,
And He answered me from His holy mountain. Selah.
I lay down and slept;
I awoke, for the Lord sustains me.**

After being pelted by the stones of Shimei's hate, David sings a song; then he gets into his sleeping bag and goes to sleep. The trust which David voiced to Zadok has been put to the test and purified by Shimei; and David seals that trust in the sacred act of sleep. So the king ends his journey

at the lowest place geographically, but at the highest pinnacle of faith, a faith so holy it casts our gaze upon his Greater Son, who...

While being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed (1 Pet 2:23-24).

III. Reflecting on the Irony of Pain

As we reflect on this scene of descent, we are struck by the irony of David's pain. It was an ache that made him vulnerable to deception, yet it made him steadfast and pure in the face of hate. His pain was a gaping hurt that blinded him, but that same hurt had imbued him with penetrating vision.

Descent Into The Dust
2 Samuel 16:1-14

*In craft of bribe,
masked in memory of that
fragrant, feminine face,
our wounded king,
bereft of friends,
is used and taken in,
but in the storm of spitting hate,
our king awake,
keeps distance, space
and sees beneath
that cruel-like face,
the longing for a distant son,
now gone,
whose face he kissed without a tear,
but now with blurry eyes
that holy search beyond that veil of tears,
that cannot make up for the years,
he sees,
'tis the face of God
drawing near.*

This sermon is dedicated to
David Roper,
who taught me to go unarmed into the wilderness,
and to silent sleep under Shimei's stones.

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1. Elie Wiesel, *Memoirs: All Rivers Run to the Sea*, (New York: Knopf, 1995), 3.

2. Ari Mark Cartun, "Topography as a Template for David's Fortunes during His Flight before Absalom," *Journal of Reform Judaism*, Spring 1991, 27.

3. Cartun, "Topography," 28.

4. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 1, *King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 196.

5. Fokkelman, *King David*, 198.

6. David Roper, *A Man to Match the Mountain: Overcoming the Obstacles of Life* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1996), 211, 213.

7. Roper, 213.

8. Cartun, "Topography," 29, writes, "Surely Paltiel's very name, 'God is my refuge,' applies to David, a refugee depending upon God's will, here! To reinforce this connection, David had been described in 15:30 as 'crying as he ascended' and Paltiel, similarly, in 3:16, had followed Michal as she was carried off into exile, 'crying as he went.'"

9. Roper, 220.

10. Fokkelman, *King David*, 199-200.

11. Fokkelman, *King David*, 201-202.

12. Fokkelman, *King David*, 202.