

CHAPTER 5

David's Later Years

THUS by the middle of David's reign, the ancient covenant promise to Abraham had been fulfilled: "To your descendants I give this land from the River of Egypt to the Great River, the river Euphrates" (Genesis 15:18). David ruled, directly or indirectly, all the territory between the Wadi el-Arish and the upper Euphrates. In the second half of his reign he had only to consolidate his realm. There is no doubt that he must have brought in a great many administrative changes and innovations, quite apart from the new capital, Jerusalem, and all that it meant to Israel and Judah. Saul had left a kingdom in name, which was still not very much more than a loosely-knit confederacy of tribes; David must have done much to break down the tribal system, not least by incorporating Canaanite cities and communities into Israel. Of the details of his administration, however, we know remarkably little, apart from two lists of his chief officials (2 Samuel 8:16ff., 20:23-26). The census recorded in 2 Samuel 24 was no doubt intended to provide information which could be used both for tax purposes and as a basis for conscription to the army. In the days of the Judges, the various leaders of Israel had been content to summon smallholders from their farms when battles were necessary; but David's victories could not have been achieved nor his conquests maintained without a standing army, which then as now lays a burden on a country's economy.¹

The census did not take place without disaster; even Joab was opposed to the measure, and it seems fair to assume that the blame for the ensuing pestilence was laid at David's door by many of the

1. For other details of David's administration that may be deduced from the biblical material, cf. J. Bright, *op. cit.*, pp. 201ff.

1. Shalmaneser III in his chariot



2. Jehu, 'son of Omri', bows
before Shalmaneser III.
From the Black Obelisk of
Shalmaneser III



people; had not the king himself confessed to sin and folly (2 Samuel 24:10)? No doubt too there were those who clung to the memory of Saul, and viewed David as a usurper; the fate of Saul's family recorded in 2 Samuel 21 will have angered such people, although David's treatment of Saul's grandson Mephibosheth (2 Samuel 9) may have done something to mitigate their bitterness. It is clear, however, that David tried to keep too much of the judicial administration in his own hands, a mistake which caused a certain amount of frustration and discontent (cf. 2 Samuel 15:3ff.). However, these factors by themselves would have come nowhere near toppling David from his throne. The threat to David came from within his own family.

In nearly every respect David showed himself an abler, shrewder and more devout ruler than Saul — with one glaring exception. Saul, so far as we know, had only two wives, and those not necessarily simultaneously; but David can scarcely be said to have observed the warning of Deuteronomy 17:17. His early marriages, at least, were an act of policy: Michal linked him with the house of Saul, Abigail and Ahinoam (1 Samuel 25:42f.) brought him into wealthy land-owning families in both the south and the north of the land, and Maacah (2 Samuel 3:3) gave him a treaty relationship with the kingdom of Geshur. What inspired most of the other marriages we do not know; but subsequent events suggest that the only woman David married for love was Bathsheba, and where she was concerned lust, adultery and murder began the story of their liaison.

The story of David and Bathsheba needs no re-telling. No modern writers could hope to match the skill and effectiveness with which Nathan the prophet pointed the moral (2 Samuel 12). If anyone is tempted to take an "objective" standpoint, and talk about the general moral standards of the ancient world and its rulers, it is sufficient to reply that Israel's sacred statute books promulgated much higher standards — and that David himself made the solemn confession "I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Samuel 12:13). The Second Book of Samuel represents the Bathsheba affair as the turning point in David's career; from now on he was to encounter problem after problem. R. A. Carlson has summed up David's career from this point on as "David under the curse."²

There was a very practical reason why David's latter years were far from happy. By building up a considerable harem, he invited palace intrigues, which could only intensify with the passing years, as his sons grew to manhood. There was as yet no precedent in Israel for the smooth transition of power from one king to the next, and it looks as if David never took the step of nominating a crown prince.

2. R. A. Carlson, *David, the Chosen King* (Uppsala, 1964), Part Two, *passim*.

He favoured Solomon, Bathsheba's son, but it is significant that at the very end of his reign, Bathsheba admonished him, "Did you not, my lord the king, swear to your maidservant, saying, 'Solomon your son shall reign after me'?" In other words, David's oath to that effect had been a private and personal one to Bathsheba alone.

Solomon was by no means the eldest son. If Michal had ever given birth to a son, he would have had a special claim to the throne, as Saul's grandson and David's son; but Michal never had a child (cf. 2 Samuel 6:23). David's first-born was Amnon, and five other sons were born to him before he transferred his capital from Hebron (2 Samuel 3:2ff.); and if the list of 2 Samuel 5:14ff. is in chronological order, Solomon was not even the first son born in Jerusalem. In terms of normal inheritance, therefore, Solomon's claim to the throne was slender. During Israel's previous history, however, the men who had claimed leadership were recognised not for any noble lineage but because they showed themselves to be men of ability and courage and action. This had been true of the "Judges", of course, but of Saul and David too. The Judges had also been recognised as men of God's appointment; they had demonstrated that they were governed by the Spirit of God, and some at least had had the unequivocal support of priests and prophets. In such circumstances of background and environment, therefore, any ambitious son of David might seek to win the crown by setting out to attract popular and prophetic support.

Whether or not David's eldest son, Amnon, was at all ambitious, there is no doubt that the third son, Absalom, had every intention of securing the throne for himself. Possibly the second son, Chileab, died in childhood or adolescence; at any rate, he took no part whatever in the succession struggle, and only Amnon seems to have stood in Absalom's way. Absalom accordingly took steps to remove the obstacle Amnon presented. Amnon for his part seems to have been no very attractive character, and he certainly gave Absalom every reason to hate him. David's example of sexual promiscuity was followed by Amnon, who raped and humiliated his half-sister Tamar — Absalom's full sister. It now became apparent that another fault of David's was over-indulgence of his children, for although he was extremely angered by Amnon's conduct, he did nothing at all to punish the wrongdoer. But in the Bathsheba affair, David had set another bad example, that of suborning to murder; it was Absalom who proceeded to follow that precedent, apparently feeling no conscience about it nor fearing punishment for it.

It took Absalom two full years to lay his plans and put them into effect. A carefully-arranged festal gathering at Baal-hazor gave him the opportunity to assassinate Amnon. Apparently he had all his brothers and half-brothers at his mercy, but only Amnon lost his life; it looks as if Absalom did not consider Solomon a potential

rival. In any case, Absalom was in no hurry, and went off into self-imposed exile at his mother's home, the royal court of Geshur. Absalom's resolve only hardened with the passage of time, but he was shrewd enough to realise that his father's temperament was different, and that in time David would be prepared to let bygones be bygones. And so it turned out; three years after Amnon's death, David needed little persuasion to invite the fratricide home again, once Joab, his commander-in-chief and long-standing adviser, applied a little pressure. Absalom returned to Jerusalem, accordingly, only to find that David had some sort of punishment in mind for him after all — to deny him a place in the royal court. There is no doubt that Absalom found it a very severe punishment; that the crown prince (in his own estimation, at least) should be denied every court privilege was a humiliation he could not brook. He endured it in silence for two years, and then set about rectifying the matter in a most high-handed fashion. He challenged his father to put him on trial, but he knew well enough David would do no such thing. Whether he knew it or not, however, Absalom had made a bad enemy; Joab was not the man to forget or forgive the wanton destruction of his property (2 Samuel 14:28ff.).

If David thought the incident closed when he welcomed Absalom back to court, he was sadly mistaken. The way now lay open for Absalom to claim the crown when his father died; but with feelings of bitter resentment towards his father, the young man saw no reason to wait so long. Four years later he staged a *coup d'état* which all but succeeded; it is certain that it would have been completely successful if Joab and his troops had not remained devotedly loyal to David.

One can with little difficulty put oneself in Absalom's position and understand — without approving — why he acted as he did. The puzzle is why and how he managed to win such a following. Naturally enough, there were those who like Shimei (2 Samuel 16:5ff.) clung to the memory of Saul and felt hatred towards David. There were also those who had reason to be discontented with David's administration — and 2 Samuel 15:1ff. indicates how Absalom played on such feeling and sought to win such people to his side. Nor must we discount Absalom's personal attractiveness and persuasive qualities. Moreover, since he was David's eldest surviving son, there was every chance that the general populace would accept the new *status quo* readily enough once David had been put out of the way. It is clear that Absalom hoped to achieve his goal by speed and surprise. But when all that is said and done, it still remains almost certain that Absalom must have drawn considerable support from other quarters. His army was no small one; a figure of 12,000 is mentioned in 2 Samuel 17:1 and in the final battle 20,000 are said to have fallen (2 Samuel 18:7). Nor can these have been

professional soldiers, for the army remained loyal to David.

It is difficult sometimes to decide whether Old Testament references to "Israel" mean the whole nation including Judah, or account.⁷ The exact details given in 2 Samuel 18:19ff. suggest that we are reading the words of a participator in the events, and this in the revolt. But what about Judah, David's own tribe? In view of the fact that it was at Hebron, in Judah, where Absalom first raised the standard of revolt, we cannot exonerate Judah. It is also significant that once Absalom was dead, the elders of Judah showed themselves extremely embarrassed by the whole affair (cf. 2 Samuel 19:11). One gets the impression that Judah was quite strongly pro-Absalom, while the northern tribes were more divided on the issue. Conceivably Absalom adopted different tactics in the two regions, exploiting administrative deficiencies in the north, and patriotic feelings in the south. (Had not David "abandoned" Hebron, and gone out of his way to court the northerners?) 2 Samuel 17:14 strongly suggests, moreover, that Absalom had restored the tribal elders to a position David had in effect taken from them.³ It has also been suggested in the light of 1 Chronicles 22:8 and 28:3 that David had gained a reputation for ruthlessness and bloodshed, perhaps largely because of the many battles he had had to fight, and that this was the major cause of the widespread disaffection.⁴

Whatever his tactics, Absalom succeeded in mobilizing a large army against his father without arousing any suspicions beforehand: no mean feat. Far from being forewarned or forearmed, David had little enough time to organize his own escape, as 2 Samuel 15 makes clear. Flight was the only course open to him for the moment, and probably there was only one compass direction, the east, which offered any safety. To the west lay little military strength, and David could scarcely flee to the Philistines now, as he had done in earlier days. To the north lay Ephraim, the most powerful of the northern tribes, and David had no time to attempt to gauge the degree of its disaffection. The southern road was out of the question, for Absalom was already marching along it towards Jerusalem. But to the east lay the Jordan, and beyond it safety. In Transjordan, there was plenty of difficult terrain, which could (and in the end, did) test Absalom's untried soldiery. David seems to have known that he could rely on the loyalty of the Transjordanian tribes; they were much more open to attack from outside than other parts of Israel, and they no doubt appreciated and valued the security David had given them. Rich landowners like Shobi and Machir and Barzillai (2 Samuel 17:27ff.) had profited from the peace and security David had brought them, and they were prepared to pay heavily to maintain David in power.

3. Cf. Y. Aharoni, *LB*, p. 274.

4. Cf. J. Weingreen, *VT* 19 (1969), pp. 263-266.

Another factor was that many of David's loyal troops were already stationed in Transjordan, simply because that was the part of Israel most open to enemy attack; once he reached Mahanaim, David was soon able to muster a competent army.

Thus we find David taking the road east out of Jerusalem, across the Kidron ravine and passing Olivet, then downhill all the way to the Jordan some twenty miles away. Absalom could not hope to cut off this route, for between the southern and eastern roads out of Jerusalem lay the barren and uninviting hills of the wilderness of Judah. Absalom's real hope of lasting success lay in swift immediate pursuit of David, but the young usurper was not shrewd enough as a strategist to appreciate the fact.

David's capital was abandoned to Absalom; even the royal concubines were left behind. In the brief interim before Absalom arrived in the city, it was left to individuals to make their own decisions whom to support. It is no surprise that Benjaminites and relatives of Saul like Shimei seized the chance to vilify David, whom they regarded as a usurper. Possibly even Mephibosheth was tempted to desert David; his servant Ziba accused him of this, and though Mephibosheth later denied it, he was clearly in no position to prove his innocence, and it looks as if David was uncertain whose story to believe (cf. 2 Samuel 19:29). Ziba, we may well believe, had his eye on the main chance; in that case, it is interesting to note how swiftly he decided to support David, not Absalom.

Valuable support for David's cause came from the priesthood (15:24), apparently unanimously. David insisted that they should remain in Jerusalem, but they would there serve to undermine Absalom's cause and to provide an information service for David. Even more valuable were the services rendered by Hushai, who had the very difficult task of offering Absalom bad advice and of making it sound like good counsel. This he achieved brilliantly.

If Absalom had little or no support from the religious authorities, he had one adviser who had a reputation for remarkably sagacious counsel, as reliable as that which could be obtained from God himself through the priesthood (16:23). His name was Ahithophel.⁵ Absalom knew beforehand that he could count on Ahithophel (15:12). We are never told Ahithophel's motives for turning against David; if indeed he was Bathsheba's grandfather, it may be conjectured that he had conceived a hatred of David for bringing shame on Bathsheba.⁶

Ahithophel's advice to Absalom was not in the least ambiguous or halfhearted. First, Absalom must burn his boats behind him; by

5. On the role of Ahithophel, see W. McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men* (SBT 44: London, 1965), pp. 55-62.

6. Cf. E. R. Dalglish, *IDB* I, p. 74 (s.v. "Ahithophel"). Ahithophel had a son Eliam (2 Samuel 23:34), and Bathsheba's father bore the same name (2 Samuel 11:3).

publicly appropriating David's harem, he would put himself in a position from which there could be no turning back. This was shrewd counsel, for if Absalom had ever had second thoughts and been reconciled to David, no doubt he would have been forgiven; but his followers would then have found themselves in a very invidious position. Hushai raised no objection to this counsel; perhaps he felt that David's cause would be best served if Absalom took a step from which there could be no turning back. Absalom took the advice (16:20ff.), and thereby fulfilled Nathan's prediction to David (cf. 12:11f.).

Ahithophel's military advice was equally practical and unequivocal; David must be pursued immediately, before he could reorganize, and be killed. Once David was dead, further opposition to Absalom would be pointless, for who could support a dead king? Ahithophel offered to organize the pursuit himself. The shrewdness of this counsel was self-evident, and Hushai was convinced that this plan must be scotched, if David were to survive and regain the throne. His counter-proposal was that Absalom should muster the biggest army possible, and overwhelm David by sheer weight of numbers; he knew full well that this would take time, and time was what David badly needed. Hushai used every artifice of emotive language and appealed to Absalom's vanity, with the result that his plan of campaign was adopted. The shrewd Ahithophel did not need to wait to see what would happen; he went straight home and committed suicide (17:23f.).

Undaunted by the loss of his best adviser, Absalom put Hushai's policy into effect, and presently marched at the head of a very big but inexperienced army into Transjordan, where he could do nothing but allow David to select the battleground. What experience of battle Absalom's commander Amasa had, we do not know; but he was no match for Joab and David's seasoned troops. The battle was joined in wooded country, and the brief statement of 2 Samuel 18:8 is eloquent: "the forest took toll of more people that day than the sword". Absalom himself was one victim of the forest; in his haste to elude some of David's men, he directed his mule carelessly, and was left helplessly dangling in mid-air when his luxuriant hair became entangled in an oak tree. David had given the strictest instructions that Absalom's life was to be spared, but the ruthless Joab saw the folly of any such unwarranted clemency, and himself ensured the usurper's death. Apart from any long-term advantages in Absalom's death, Joab saw clearly that it would immediately end the revolt just as Ahithophel had anticipated that David's death would quell opposition to Absalom. Too many men had already been killed in the battle, and Joab was able to pull back his troops as soon as Absalom was dead (18:15f.).

The story of how David heard the news of his rebel son's death,

and of his reactions to it, is told with a pathos and realism that affects every reader. It is widely held, even by those who are in general fairly sceptical about the historical accuracy of Old Testament books, that in these chapters we have a scarcely-edited eye-witness account.⁷ The exact details given in 2 Samuel 18:19ff. suggest that we are reading the words of a participator in the events, and this would very probably be Zadok's son, Ahimaaz. The whole of 2 Samuel 9-20 and 1 Kings 1f. may derive from him, for Zadok and his family must have been well placed to know what went on in the palace.

It appears that David was so beside himself with grief over Absalom's death that he was in danger of letting the situation slip. Absalom's defeat and death paved the way for David to take firm control of his kingdom once again, but strong and effective action was necessary. Joab evidently feared that anarchy would soon overtake the realm, and he urged David in typically blunt and brutal terms to get control of himself and his affairs. David responded to Joab's exhortations, although he was already too late to prevent something of a breach between Judah and the northern tribes. The situation compelled him to make a special appeal to his own tribe Judah, and any hint of favouritism was bound to cause annoyance and jealousy to the northern tribesmen, particularly if their loyalty to David had been less divided than Judah's. But David dared not lose the support of Judah, and he had to risk northern resentment. It is particularly surprising to see that he appointed the rebel commander-in-chief as his own leading military officer, displacing Joab; it is difficult to decide whether the chief reason for such a move was political necessity, the wish to conciliate, or simply spite towards Joab.

Judah was successfully wooed by David, whose family continued to reign in Judah for more than three centuries. Most of the men of the north pocketed their pride and allowed David to resume his control over them; he had after all brought security and a measure of prosperity, and there was no viable alternative. Nevertheless there was an abortive attempt to detach the northern tribes from David. This second rebellion was led by a Benjaminite, Sheba by name, who unlike Absalom endeavoured to appeal to inter-tribal jealousies: "What share have we in David? We have no lot in the son of Jesse. Away to your homes, O Israel" (20:1).

Probably we should not take the statement "the men of Israel all left David" (20:2) too literally. We may well believe that many took the line of least resistance, and waited to see what would happen;

7. R. N. Whybray is a rare exception; see his *The Succession Narrative (SBT ii, 9: London, 1968)*, pp. 10-19. See now J. A. Soggin in J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller, *Israelite and Judaean History* (OTL: London, 1977), pp. 337f; D. M. Gunn, *The Story of King David* (JSOT Supplement 6: Sheffield 1978).

but it is at any rate clear from the sequel that Sheba gained very little active support. None of the garrison cities opened their gates to him; despite a false start, David's troops speedily pursued him to the northern limit of Israelite territory, the city of Abel of Beth-maacah, which lay very near Dan (the traditional northern outpost). Thanks to the intervention of a wise woman of the city, which appears to have been renowned for sagacity, not even a battle was necessary, and it would appear that the only man to lose his life was Sheba himself. Similarly the only recorded casualty on David's side was the commander-in-chief, Amasa, and he was killed not by Sheba's troops but by the ruthless and efficient Joab, who thus resumed his position as David's general.

David's rule was not again threatened, and on the surface all seemed as it had been before Absalom's revolt. But not only was David himself a different man, never now to be free from palace intrigues; his kingdom had lost its inner unity. If he had been politically neutral in earlier years, he was now firmly aligned with Judah, at least in people's minds. The seeds of dissension were there, and would spring up and come to fruition half a century later.

For the rest of David's reign, we have no record of events; perhaps there was in any case little to record, but the biblical writer limits his interest to the question of the succession. When we next meet David, he is an old and failing man (1 Kings 1:1).⁸ He had nominated Solomon to succeed him, but had taken insufficient care to ensure a smooth succession, and his eldest surviving son, Adonijah, saw a chance to seize the throne. Like Absalom before him, he laid careful plans; but where Absalom had relied chiefly on popular support, secrecy and speed, Adonijah saw the value of powerful and influential friends. Joab was the most notable military figure in the land, and Abiathar the senior representative of the priesthood; it is a testimony to Adonijah's personality that he was able to win the allegiance of them both. They had both served David's interests loyally for many years.

With the full support of the army and the religious authorities behind him, Adonijah's cause could not have failed; but in fact he had neither. If Abiathar sided with Adonijah, his colleague Zadok did not, and neither did the outstanding prophet of the time, Nathan. Of more immediate practical importance, however, was the fact that Joab shared the military power with Benaiah, and the latter was opposed to Adonijah. On paper, Joab was the senior officer; but Benaiah, the commander of David's personal troops (cf. 2 Samuel 20:23), was in the position of having loyal soldiers on the spot, and it was their presence which tipped the scales in Solomon's favour.

8. The last four chapters of 2 Samuel present a series of episodes drawn from earlier periods of the reign of David.

The climax came when Adonijah, who had made no secret of his aspirations (cf. 1 Kings 1:5), decided that the time for action had arrived and made preparations to hold a sacrificial meal at En-rogel, just outside Jerusalem. There is no doubt that its own coronation was to have been the "grand finale" of this meal. His neglect to invite Solomon and others (1 Kings 1:10) showed that he had no intention of "peaceful coexistence" with them, as Professor Gray puts it,⁹ and Solomon's supporters, who had obviously been waiting for Adonijah to make a rash move, immediately went into action. David was easily persuaded to make Solomon his co-regent, and Adonijah was adroitly out-manoeuvred.

Ancient Jerusalem had only two natural sources of water, both of them located just east of the city, outside the walls. The more southerly of the two was En-rogel, today's "Job's Well", beside the village of Silwan, at the southern end of the Kidron Valley; it was there that the abortive coronation of Adonijah took place. Solomon's party, with David's blessing, held their ceremony at the other spring, Gihon (now commonly known as "the Virgin's Fountain"), which lay rather nearer the city, but was yet within earshot of En-rogel. 1 Kings 1 relates how the pomp and ceremony of Solomon's procession from Gihon back into the city was audible to Adonijah and his guests; their consternation may be imagined.

These events had their sequel; most notably, they led to the removal of Abiathar from the joint priesthood, which left Zadok and his successors in sole possession of the high priestly office. But that did not occur till after David's death.

We do not know how long the co-regency lasted — a year or two at most, one would think, for David was already very old and infirm when Solomon's coronation took place. David's days of forceful action had passed, but he was still capable of sagacious advice, as we see in his final charge to Solomon, recounted in 1 Kings 2:1ff. Much of this was unexceptionable: "Be strong and show yourself a man, Fulfil your duty to the LORD your God; conform to his ways, observe his statutes and his commandments, his judgements and his solemn precepts, as they are written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in whatever you do and whichever way you turn, and that the Lord may fulfil this promise that he made about me: 'If your descendants take care to walk faithfully in my sight with all their heart and with all their soul, you shall never lack a successor on the throne of Israel'" (verses 2-4). This advice Solomon should have heeded carefully. But David went on to show a vindictive spirit, very different from the clemency he exercised throughout his reign. One can understand his feeling towards his old enemy Shimei, but nobody had served David more loyally than Joab, whose recent

9. J. Gray, *Kings*,² p. 84.

espousal of Adonijah's cause showed his opposition to Solomon, not his disloyalty to David. David's hatred of Joab no doubt dated from the death of Absalom, but till his senility the king kept such unworthy thoughts in check. In extenuation, we may observe that David probably wished Solomon to have a more trouble-free reign than he had himself experienced and accordingly urged him to give short shrift to potential trouble-makers. At any rate, whatever the morality of it, the advice was shrewd, and Solomon not only accepted it but built upon it.