

## A Tale of Two Kings

*Ruth, 1 Samuel, Psalm 18 and 22*

### **Ruth and Boaz**

Something had to be done, and Yahweh was doing it. Quietly.

A famine in Judah drove a family to Moab from Bethlehem. (See map, page 343.) The two sons of the family married Moabite women. Later, the father and both sons died. The bereaved mother, Naomi, returned to Bethlehem, and one of her daughters-in-law was too loyal to let her go alone. Bitter Naomi and faithful Ruth survived several months by grit and grace—Ruth gathered the sheaves of grain the harvesters left behind in rich men's fields.

But Yahweh maneuvered things so that Ruth was working in the field of Boaz, an unmarried kinsman of Naomi's who was far more faithful to his God than most Israelites of the day. Boaz noticed that Ruth had more guts and more morals than the wealthier women he knew, so he was entirely willing to fulfill a kinsman's duty to take over Naomi's husband's property and marry Ruth to provide children for her late husband's line. He didn't care that Ruth was a foreigner whom most Israelites would consider scum; she loved Yahweh and lived like it.

The book of Ruth calls Boaz and Ruth a man and woman of

“excellence” — jewels of loyalty and generosity in the slimepit of vice and selfishness that was Israel in the late eleventh century BC. They were nobodies, just trying to live God’s way. But because they made themselves available to Him, Yahweh let them play a key, if quiet, place in His design. Boaz was a descendant of Judah through Perez. His and Ruth’s first son was named Obed. Obed had a son named Jesse. And Yahweh had plans for one of Jesse’s sons.

### Hannah and Samuel

About the time Ruth and Boaz were happily raising Obed, another wife was suffering the curse of barrenness less than thirty miles north. Her husband’s other wife teased her to the point that Hannah was praying desperately for a baby. When Yahweh finally gave her a son, she was so grateful that she dedicated him to serve at the tabernacle as soon as he was about three years old. She gave him into the care of Eli, the priest in charge.

Eli was not a bad old guy, but his sons seduced the cleaning women and extorted from the people who brought sacrifices, and Eli did nothing but scold them. Yahweh was so incensed that He told Eli He was going to wipe out his family.

At this time, Israel’s main threat was the Philistines. The fight was terribly uneven because the Philistines knew how to forge weapons from iron, while the Israelites knew how to make only bronze or stone weapons. Eli’s sons tried to use the ark in battle like a talisman, but Yahweh turned His back. The ark was captured, Eli’s sons died, and that evening Eli died of shock when he heard the news. Yahweh sent plagues until the Philistines sent the ark back to Israel, but the Israelites put it in a little town and ignored it for twenty years.

Meanwhile, Hannah’s son Samuel grew up to be a priest and a prophet. Because they trusted his prophecies and legal decisions, the people began to rely on him as their unofficial leader. He managed to do what no judge before him had done: unite the unruly tribes under one religious and legal authority. Samuel led the nation back to being faithful to Yahweh, and the tide of war began to turn in Israel’s favor. The prophet-priest was even willing to serve as military chieftain when the need pressed. In all,

things went well for Israel as long as Samuel was traveling from town to town settling legal cases and exhorting the people to rely on Yahweh rather than Baal and Astarte. Samuel was preparing Israel for the next stage of her life in Yahweh’s plan.

### Saul

When Samuel grew old, the people grew nervous. Like Eli, he had spent so much time fathering Israel that he had failed to raise his own sons properly. When he appointed them as judges in his place, they took bribes and turned the legal system into a racket.

Israel’s elders had had enough. The nation had been a mess for two centuries, and they wanted somebody they could trust to establish order. The Israelite population was outgrowing its crude villages huddled in the hills, Canaan’s least farmable land. The people wanted to spread into the lush plains, and for that, they needed a battle chief who could unite the tribes. Under the current system, a good leader might arise, but when he died Israel was back to square one because there was no way to find a successor other than to see who turned up. The elders didn’t trust Yahweh to lead them, so they demanded a human king.

Samuel was furious and warned that they would regret the decision. But Yahweh simply said, *You want a king? Okay — you see how you like it.* The people should have learned from Eli’s and Samuel’s sons that hereditary monarchy was not all it was cracked up to be.

The fact was, Yahweh had been planning to give Israel a king. But He didn’t care for the people’s motive: to be like the other nations. They were like eight-year-olds who just had to have what the other kids had.

Yahweh also wanted to put on record the difference between a good king and a bad one. He wanted to give Israel a taste of wise government so they would never settle for less, and He wanted to make them good and sick of rulers who cared more for themselves than for Yahweh or His people.

Now if it were up to you, would you choose a spiritual leader whose overdependence on people’s approval led him to break a

few instructions about ritual and holy war? Or a leader who committed adultery and murder, and who was such a lousy father that he let his eldest son get away with raping his daughter and his second son get away with killing the first?

Yahweh chose man number two, of course. Approval seeking cost Saul his kingdom, but Yahweh forgave David's crimes. Why? Because Yahweh looked deeper than the outward action, down to the motives and attitudes of the heart.

Saul was a tall, handsome warrior, a fine military commander, successful for years. But it became obvious that he did not possess the basic quality of leadership in Yahweh's kingdom: trust in the King of kings. Fear of losing his men's loyalty made Saul disobey Yahweh repeatedly. People's opinions and his own interests just meant more to him than Yahweh's instructions, so like Adam, Saul could not imagine letting Yahweh be in charge. Samuel eventually notified him that he was going to be replaced. Even then, Saul didn't actually grieve that he had disobeyed Yahweh but only begged Samuel to keep up appearances so the elders of Israel wouldn't know the two leaders were at odds.

### David

Yahweh genuinely felt sorry that He had to put Israel through the misery of being led by Saul, even though the nation deserved him. Israel's Father sent Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint one of the sons of Jesse as king. This one, Yahweh assured Samuel, would remember that he was only vice-regent ruling under Yahweh's authority. (Anointing with oil signified conferring Yahweh's power and authority. Priests and kings were traditionally anointed.)

Samuel liked the looks of Jesse's seven older sons, but Yahweh commented, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but [Yahweh] looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). The chosen one turned out to be Jesse's youngest, David, a teenager whose whole life had been spent herding sheep and composing songs.

But Yahweh knew what He was doing. Adolescent David had guts that came not from self-confidence but from a matter-of-fact trust in Yahweh. One day Jesse sent him to take provisions to his brothers who were off soldiering with Saul. David found them all cowering in fear of a Philistine champion named

Goliath, who had challenged Israel to settle the battle by single combat. Neither Saul nor his warriors dared face this hulk with the fifteen-pound iron point on his spear shaft. But David thought it was disgraceful for Yahweh's army to cringe in their tents. It never occurred to him to doubt his God, so he was sure Goliath was dead meat for insulting Yahweh. And true to His name, Yahweh was I Am There For David. The teenager felled Goliath with a well-aimed shot from his sling.

Everybody was more than impressed with David the shepherd warrior. But Saul, whose courage was crumbling, was also beginning to suffer fits of depression, irrational jealousy, and violence. He had rejected Yahweh, so Yahweh was allowing an evil spirit to torment him.<sup>1</sup> Saul's servants were getting frantic, but they remembered that young David was also known as a fine harpist. So David was summoned to Saul's court to play music when the king had one of his attacks. Saul liked the boy and made him an armor-bearer.

### Fugitive Singer

David proved brilliant in battle, and soon the people were singing victory songs about Saul and David in the same breath.

That was the last straw for Saul. His paranoia attached firmly to David; nothing anyone could do would shake it. He tried to get rid of David by sending him on suicide missions, but David always made it through. One of Saul's schemes backfired, and David ended up married to Saul's daughter. He now had a legitimate claim to the throne, and Saul was even more scared. At last he tried to run David through with his spear, but David fled.

So began a decade in which David fled from Saul, who became obsessed with chasing him down. The Philistine war languished. Saul murdered a cityful of priests for allegedly harboring David, so intent was he to foil Yahweh's plan to replace him. But David twice declined the chance to kill Saul; he was determined to let Yahweh deal with Saul and fulfill His promises in His own way. He refused to try to take by force what Yahweh promised by grace.

What kept David going through years as the fugitive captain of an outlaw band in the wastelands, for a while even working for

the Philistines in order to stay alive? His secret was pouring out his fears, hopes, praises, and accusations to Yahweh in songs. He lived an intensely honest relationship with his God. He braved the truth about his own circumstances and feelings:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from saving me,  
so far from the words of my groaning? (Psalm 22:1)

And about Yahweh's unshakable character:

Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;  
you are the praise of Israel.  
In you our fathers put their trust;  
they trusted and you delivered them. (Psalm 22:3-4)

It was the *Yet* that sustained David through years of terror and seemingly futile waiting.

David's trust was not in the rock caves and fortresses he hid in, but in Yahweh, his real refuge. He could write about Yahweh as an angry thundering God:

The earth trembled and quaked,  
and the foundations of the mountains shook;  
they trembled because he was angry.  
Smoke rose from his nostrils;  
consuming fire came from his mouth,  
burning coals blazed out of it. (Psalm 18:7-8)

But David knew that were this wrath directed against him, he should slink in shame. It was directed against the spiritual and human forces arrayed against him:

The cords of death entangled me;  
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me. . . .  
In my distress I called to [Yahweh];  
I cried to my God for help.  
From his temple he heard my voice;

my cry came before him, into his ears.  
[Then] the earth trembled and quaked. . . .  
He reached down from on high and took hold of me;  
he drew me out of deep waters.  
He rescued me from my powerful enemy,  
from my foes, who were too strong for me.  
(Psalm 18:4,6-7,16-17)

Yahweh was David's Dad; He would handle the bullies who picked on His kid, although He would let David go through just enough trouble to raise him into a man.

#### Saul's End

Yahweh did deal with Saul. Saul had killed or driven off his priests because they had aided David, his prophets had deserted him to join David in exile, and Yahweh wouldn't talk to him directly, so he was at his wits' end when the Philistines amassed to attack Israel. David had Yahweh's constant guidance about where to go and what battles to fight, but Saul had only silence. Crazed with panic, he consulted a witch to call up the ghost of Samuel (who had been dead for some years by now) for counsel, but the spirit he met only promised that Saul and his sons would be carrion fodder the next day.

And so it was. The Philistines overwhelmed Israel, and in despair Saul took his own life. Yahweh had maneuvered David a hundred miles south of the battlefield to protect him. When news came of Saul's death, he could not rejoice in an enemy's defeat, but grieved for a man he had loved, who could have been great.

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#### NOTE

1. It seems that while psychological problems can come from chemical imbalance, responses to childhood trauma, and other causes, evil spirits can also be involved. Yahweh lets them attack people who give them permission by choosing to reject Him. If people want to serve darkness, He lets them reap the results in hopes that they will come to their senses.