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The Fall of Kings in *Tanakh* and Shakespeare

by

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"For God's sake let us sit upon the ground

And tell sad stories of the death of kings!

How some have been deposed, some slain in war,

Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed."

—*Richard II*, III: ii

It is a story of the anointed King who showed early bravery and leadership, who created enemies out of friends and relatives, who died a violent death, and whose dynasty was supplanted. It is a story of the well-loved successor forced into exile who returned to become King and who then faced battle with traditional enemies and civil war. It is a story of the son of the successor who achieved glory greater than his father but whose own son saw the dynasty ruptured. It is a story of a curse that foretold generations of civil war and rebellion. This cinematic, exciting story of violence begetting violence is the history of both the early Israelite Kingdom and the late Plantagenet Kings in Medieval England.

In fourteenth-century England, Richard II becomes King at a very young age and displays courage from the outset. Richard creates an enemy out of his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke and banishes him. Bolingbroke returns, takes the crown, and Richard dies a violent death. Bolingbroke becomes Henry IV and faces endless rebellion. His son Henry V achieves glory in a famous battle, but upon his death, the kingdom descends into the bloody civil war known as the War of Roses.

In the biblical books of Samuel and Kings, Saul is anointed King of Israel, fights bravely, turns against his protégé and son-in-law, David, forcing him into exile. The prophet Samuel announces God’s repudiation of Saul’s kingship, and Saul dies in battle, succeeded by David. David becomes King, unifies the nation, but battles with enemies and in civil war against his own son. David dies and is succeed by his son, Solomon who achieves peace and great glory by building the Temple in Jerusalem. Following Solomon's death, the Kingdom is riven into the Kingdoms of Judah and Israel, never to be reunited under a Davidic monarchy.

The story of these two monarchies is rooted in the conflict between the king’s public obligations and his personal wishes and relationships. While war and peace are interwoven throughout both narratives, familial conflicts are more devastating than those with traditional enemies. In both monarchies, personal actions, far from scenes of battle, shatter peace and usher in generations of dynastic struggle.

The Bible is sparing in historical detail but presents Saul, David, Solomon, and other biblical figures as flesh-and-blood personalities with virtues and vices. There are ample historical records relating to Kings Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V, but their reigns were dramatically re-imagined by Shakespeare in the eponymous plays which have become the principal, if not always precisely accurate, record of their reigns. [Except as noted with respect to events occurring prior to the action in the play, this article compares the characters discussed

based on the written record in the Bible and Shakespeare.]

Shakespeare made no overt reference to the Kingdom of Israel in his History Tetralogy (*Richard II, Henry IV*, parts 1 and 2, and *Henry V*) but there are too many parallels to ignore. The similarities have been noted and cataloged, usually within the context of Shakespeare and the Bible in general. At least one scholar has focused specifically on Shakespeare and the David story (Evett, David: *Types of King David in Shakespeare's Lancastrian Tetralogy* in Shakespeare Studies; 1981 Vol. 14, p. 139), but he was interested in finding strands of David's personality in a host of Shakespearean characters rather than in comparing the two histories.

As has sometimes happened in English history, Richard II was not meant to be King, at least not when he acceded to the throne. His grandfather, Edward III famously had too many sons, causing much grief in succeeding generations as rival claims to the throne fought it out. Edward's oldest son (also Edward), known as the Black Prince, died before the old King. On Edward III's death, his grandson, the Black Prince's son, succeeded to the crown as Richard II. He was 10 years old.

Twenty-five centuries earlier, Saul, apparently a common herdsman, was searching for lost donkeys when he encountered the prophet Samuel, who anointed him King of Israel. Saul's qualifications seem to be his good looks and great height. Prior to Saul, ancient Israel had no King and was ruled by a succession of Judges, who were usually military leaders and guided by prophets. Samuel was distrustful of monarchy and only reluctantly complied with the people's wishes for a King, but not before warning them of the burden the King would place upon the people.

Saul and Richard each demonstrated exceptional skill and bravery in their early careers. Richard's early act of bravery is not found in Shakespeare; it took place when Richard was only 14, well before the action in Shakespeare's play unfolds. In 1381, years of tension between peasants and landowners brewed into the "Peasants' Revolt." Within a month, the rebels, having murdered several of the King's chief ministers, were just outside the city of London demanding the abolition of serfdom. In two separate confrontations, the 14-year-old King, whose forces were greatly outnumbered, stood his ground and disbanded the rebels (Saul, Nigel, *Richard II*, p. 62 ff, Yale University Press. London and New Haven 1997). As another historian put it, "There was little doubt among the King's men that they owed their lives to his courage and presence of mind" (Norwich, John J. *Shakespeare's Kings* p. 65 Scribner, New York, 1999).

Chapter 11 of I Samuel recounts the fear of the Israelites under the domination of the Ammonites. The tribes of Israel were not yet fully united, and Saul's kingship was not universally accepted. Saul, newly anointed, musters a great army through a symbolic act of brutality (cutting up a pair of oxen and sending pieces to the 12 tribes) and soundly defeats the enemy. Saul demonstrated great political wisdom as well as military skill by forbidding reprisals against those Israelites who challenged his kingship. This early victory unified the tribes and firmly established Saul's rule.

While these early triumphs brought praise to both Kings, instability and self-inflicted turmoil soon followed. As Richard II reached manhood he became increasingly arrogant and antagonistic to the nobility. He engendered conflict with his own family and particularly, his uncles the Dukes of Gloucester and Lancaster. He appropriated estates from some nobles and gave them to his court favorites. Richard's enemies brought him to heel with trials at the so-called "Merciless Parliament," resulting in the condemnation of certain of Richard's favorites. Richard subsequently proceeded to exact a measure of revenge, which sets the stage for Shakespeare's play focusing on the intra-family feud.

John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, Richard's uncle and father of Henry Bolingbroke (soon to be Henry IV) was the richest and most powerful man (after the King) in England. He established Richard's kingship by accepting Richard as King while still a boy rather than challenging him for the crown. With his rule seemingly secure, Richard instigated a feud with Lancaster's son, Henry Bolingbroke. Henry and another noble, the Duke of Norfolk asserted mutual accusations of treason against one another and agreed to single combat before King Richard to settle the matter. Rather than allow the combat to go forward, Richard exiled Norfolk for life and Henry Bolingbroke for a term of years. King Richard was afraid of what might result from the success of one knight or the other because the incident giving rise to the mutual charges related to the death of the Duke of Gloucester, Richard's uncle, a death undoubtedly desired (and probably ordered) by King Richard. Henry accepted his exile but when his father, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster died, Richard confiscated his properties and divided them among his own sycophantic followers. Richard thus sent the devastating message to the nobility that in this King's realm, the laws of inheritance do not apply, only the King's will. Rather than solidify his reign with allies, Richard created a powerful enemy (with allies) who was shortly destined to replace him. John J. Norwich states, "There could no longer be any doubt that the King's mental balance was seriously disturbed" (p. 116).

Just as Richard succumbed to jealousy and perhaps madness, Saul also created an enemy of a would-be ally and initiated the sequence of events which inexorably led to his downfall, death and replacement. David is introduced to the Saul narrative as the successor-King when Saul disobeys God's command (conveyed by the prophet Samuel) on the conduct of the war against Israel's enemies. There are, in fact, three introductions of David: the warrior-lad who slays Goliath; the musician who soothes King Saul; and the youngest son of Jesse improbably anointed by Samuel as the next King of Israel. David had defeated the Philistine giant, Goliath, and inspired the Israelite warriors to further victories. He became an important part of Saul's Court and was given Saul's daughter in marriage. Yet Saul could not abide the song of the Israelite women after battle: "Saul has killed his thousands, but David his tens of thousands" (I Samuel 18:7).

Whether it was mental illness or legitimate distress that his dynasty was ending before it truly began, Saul determined to eliminate his young rival. Saul made several attempts to kill David, and Saul's enmity split his family. In describing one such attempt, the Bible asserts that Saul suffered from a form of madness: "An evil spirit from God descended on Saul and he raved within the house" (I Samuel 18:10). Saul's son, Jonathan, and his daughter, Michal, both loved David, and in separate incidents saved him from their father's wrath. Finally, David fled from Saul and sought refuge with Israel's mortal enemy, the Philistines. Without the support of David, Saul was unable to defeat the Philistines; he and the crown prince, Jonathan, perished in battle, paving the path for David to assume the kingship.

When Richard and Saul ultimately die, their successors have similar reactions to the news—not of relief, but of guilt and sorrow. Richard died in isolation at the hand of an assassin who thought he was following Henry's wishes. In Shakespeare, Richard's murderer, Exton, brings the news to King Henry who disowns the intent to have Richard killed, banishes Exton and vows a penitential pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Saul died in battle with the Philistines, which the Israelites lost in the absence of their hero, David. An Amalekite brings news to David of Saul's death. The Amalekite says he found Saul gravely wounded and, in response to Saul's explicit request, administered a merciful death blow. David immediately orders the death of the Amalekite for "destroying the anointed of the Lord." David delivers a poetic elegy over Saul and Jonathan, "O how the mighty have fallen." He laments them as "lovely and pleasant...swifter than eagles, mightier than lions." This dirge is testament of remorse for a beloved enemy that repeatedly tried to kill the poet (II Samuel 1).

Although Henry IV and David disrupted the dynastic order, each was intent to create his own dynasty and determined to pass the kingship on by inheritance. Arguably, the most important achievement of each King was to provide an heir who solidified the dynastic rule and who had achievements that rivaled or outshone those of the father. Henry IV's successor, Henry V, after a wild and reckless youth (chronicled in Shakespeare's two Henry IV plays) achieved a near miraculous victory over the French at Agincourt, married the daughter of the French King, and brought the promise that his heirs would rule France as well as England. Although his infant son did succeed him (as Henry VI), the victories of Henry V proved short-lived and were followed by the civil war known as the War of Roses. David's son, Solomon, built the Temple in Jerusalem and expanded the Israelite Kingdom. On Solomon's death, however, that kingdom split into the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, never again to be united.

The Plantagenet and Israelite Kingdoms thus share an unusual historical path: a legitimate King is deposed; a new King not in the natural line of succession is enthroned and establishes a new inherited dynastic order; the new King is followed by his son who achieves glory in his own right; the second-generation King, however, is unable to pass on a stable kingdom to his son and the realm is plagued by civil war and turmoil that lasts many generations

Part of the enduring fascination with the histories of Henry and David is the manner in which they were made to live their lives before and during their rule. They were each forced into exile before assuming the crown and were removed from the luxury of court to the bitterness of life with a national enemy. Once in power, they faced endless rebellion and war within their families. What Shakespeare wrote about Henry is equally true for David: "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown" (*Henry IV,* Part 2, III:i).

Both Henry and David took refuge with the traditional enemies of their people, France in the case of Henry and Philistia in the case of David. Henry was sentenced to six years banishment when Richard interrupted the single combat between Henry and the Duke of Norfolk. Henry went off to France to begin his exile but broke the terms of his punishment and returned early upon the death of John of Gaunt, his father. Henry did not return alone; he had a substantial following in England and he came from France with armed followers. His return precipitated the fall of Richard and led to Henry's coronation. David escaped several attempts on his life by King Saul and ultimately fled to Gath a Philistine city and became part of the royal guard of Achish, King of Gath. In exile, David amassed a large band of relatives and followers who formed the core of his

support.

David and Henry each had to fight off rebellions from those who were close to them after becoming King. Henry IV was made King with the support of the Percy family, especially the Earl of Northumberland. Years later, incensed over King Henry's treatment of the family in the matter of some Scottish prisoners, the Percys and their Welsh and Scottish allies engage in open rebellion against Henry. King Henry and his sons battle the rebels and defeat them at Shrewsbury where the Prince of Wales (the future Henry V) first demonstrated his military prowess by killing Harry Hotspur, a far more experienced warrior. In Shakespeare's account the rebellion is finally put down by the trick of a false promise of truce. King David seems to have had few moments of peace overcoming supporters of Saul and others and then having a fierce struggle with his son, Absalom. Absalom had proclaimed himself King while David was very much alive and mustered a huge force to seize the crown by force. Like Henry's battle, this rebellion was also put down by a trick. Absalom appeared to have the upper hand but followed deliberately bad advice given by a double-agent loyal to David. Absalom's end is well-known in art and literature: He swings between heaven and earth caught in a tree and is cut down by David's general, Joab.

[This parallel may appear somewhat strained since it compares David with Henry V, not Henry IV but the reigns of the two Henrys were contiguous and Shakespeare's dramas present one continuous story.]

Henry and David are each taken to task by a revered figure, and notwithstanding their absolute power, each accepts the criticism and grows in maturity. Henry had led a riotous life and consorted with vulgarians, including Falstaff and his company. In his early years, he was roundly criticized and brought to heel by the distinguished Chief Justice. Upon his father's death, Henry V meets the Lord Chief Justice, who acknowledges that he fears that the new King does not like him. The jurist tells the new King that he was bound to respect the law in order to strengthen the old King's legitimate rule. The new King tells the Chief Justice that he is right and that is he happy to "have a man so bold that dares do justice on my proper son."

David's fault was far greater. He lusts after Bathsheba, sleeps with her, and when she announces her pregnancy, David causes the death of her husband. The prophet Nathan makes the sin clear to David by presenting him a parable of the rich man who covets the poor man's lone sheep. Nathan foretells the grievous punishments that will befall David. Rather than rage against Nathan, David acknowledges the sin and shortly thereafter suffers the first of many punishments

involving the death of loved ones and the rebellion of sons (II Samuel 11).

King David and Henry IV had forceful personalities that propelled them to kingship but they were also beloved by the common people, in contrast to their predecessors. Richard bitterly receives the report of Henry's departure to banishment where a witness "observed his courtship of the common people, how he did seem to dive into their hearts with humble and familiar courtesy." Richard sarcastically notes, "what reverence [Henry] did throw away on slaves" (*Richard II* , I:iv).

When King David brought the Ark of the Lord (carrying the Tablets of the Law) to Jerusalem he danced and leapt to the delight of the crowd. He was harshly and bitterly criticized by his wife, Michal, King Saul's daughter for vulgar behavior "uncovering himself in front of his retainers' servant girls." David retorted at once: "I danced before the Lord who chose me over your father and all his family and appointed me to rule over the Lord's people." David added that he may continue to dance in that vulgar fashion and would receive still more honor from the servant girls (I Samuel 6).

King David and Henry V were both beloved figures and great leaders but each had a dark side and engaged in ghastly massacres. Henry V was a great military leader who directed his vastly outnumbered forces to a celebrated victory over the French at Agincourt. When Henry heard that some French soldiers had killed the English youth guarding the luggage, he ordered retaliation by having all the French prisoners killed rather than being taken to captivity. David had escaped Saul's persecution by gaining refuge with the Philistine King Achish. David and his followers acted as a Philistine auxiliary army and Achish thought David was raiding Israelite towns for booty. In fact, David stayed away from his native country and confined his raids to non-Philistine and also non-Israelite towns. In order to eliminate the possibility of witnesses, after the raids, David's band killed every one in the raided villages, including women and children (I Samuel 27).

Richard and King Saul are tragic figures and not just because of their violent and untimely deaths. They each had fatal flaws that inexorably led from great success and universal acceptance to failure, deposition, and death. They each had internal demons that drove them to ruinous jealousy and self-destructive acts. Richard enraged the nobility by confiscating property and promoting court lackeys. When Henry Bolingbroke returned from exile to claim his father's entitlements and ultimately the throne, Richard was bereft of friends and was no match for Henry. David did not seek to replace Saul but when the prophet

Samuel announced that God had repudiated Saul's kingship, Saul's paranoid hostility towards David made David's succession virtually inevitable.

David and Henry (both IV and V) were far from perfect. They were effective but sometimes brutal leaders. They did not always lead exemplary moral lives. Henry IV was racked with guilt over Richard's displacement and the young Henry V lived a riotous youth leaving a trail of mischief and causing grief to his father. King David lusted after Bathsheba and caused the death of her husband. Nevertheless, Henry (particularly Henry V) and David are not seen as tragic figures but as beloved heroes with some flaws. This contrast between the King and his successor is not simply the result of the victor being the hero in history. It results, rather, from something sad, tragic and inevitable in the fall of Richard and Saul and from the strength of will and magnetic personalities of Henry and King David.

At the end of their lives, Henry IV and David each had a death-bed scene with his successor replete with Machiavellian advice. Solomon was enthroned as King with David's blessing while David was still alive. David's parting advice to Solomon was to put to death certain of David's enemies whom David had seemingly forgiven in his lifetime. David's final act, perhaps protective of his son's throne, is one of bloody vengeance. In a final scene of reconciliation between Henry IV and his son who is about to become King Henry V, the old King advises his son to consolidate his rule by instigating a foreign war.

David and Henry IV were great leaders but their lives were complicated by power and abuse of power. Each heard that his actions would bring retribution in later life and in future generations.

The Bishop of Carlisle rebukes Henry IV at the time of his coronation for his usurpation and prophesizes:

> The blood of English shall manure the ground,
>
> And future ages groan for this foul act;
>
> Peace shall go to sleep with Turks and infidels,
>
> And in this seat of peace, tumultuous wars
>
> Shall kin with kin and kind with kind confound. (*Richard II*, IV:i)

In similar terms, the Prophet Nathan rebukes King David with God's judgment after the sin with Bathsheba: "Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from thy house…I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house" (II Samuel 12:10–11).

Both these prophecies came to pass. The War of Roses saw the destruction of a generation of Plantagenet Kings and Princes and peace was restored only with the new Tudor Dynasty. David's children rose up against him and were killed and his son Solomon's kingdom was racked with division and war for hundreds of years.

Conflicts within families or with allies are often more devastating than those with traditional or natural enemies. Richard's kingship was made secure by his family's acceptance of his rule as a young boy. There were family members who also had valid claims to the Crown but Richard was selected and protected by powerful uncles. Logically, Richard should have made an ally of his first cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, and used him to solidify his reign. Instead, Richard sent Henry into exile setting into motion the almost clockwork-like events that led to his ruin.

Logically, Saul should have loved David, who was his key military asset as well as his son-in-law. Instead, Saul repeatedly tried to kill David, who fled and was absent from the ruinous battle that destroyed Saul and ended his dynasty. Logically, Absalom should have loved and honored his father, David. Instead, he fomented rebellion and forfeited not only his future rule but his life. While the *Tanakh* lays the blame for Saul's deposition to his disobedience and implies that Absalom's rebellion was partial punishment for David's sin with Bathsheba, family and personal dynamics surely played their roles in these destructive acts.

In each case, illogical jealousy by the King (Saul and Richard), who was more powerful and stronger, towards the subject (David and Henry), who was an underling and weaker brought about personal downfall. Ultimately, as the prophet Nathan and the Bishop of Carlisle each foresaw, these episodes of personal enmity were to shatter peace for generations.

We are accustomed to think that nations go to war for great national causes. *Tanakh* and Shakespeare teach us that peace is sometimes disrupted by individual actions and less than noble causes. Personal jealousy, prejudice, and unwarranted hatred have all led to war, and not just in ancient times. Students of World War I can identify the political and economic background of the conflict but

none doubt the impact of the family relationships between the cousins, the Kaiser, the Czar, and the King of England. The blessing of peace must not be taken for granted and rulers (even democratic ones) must take care to promote policies and establish personal relationships that promote and nurture peace. Otherwise, “peace may go to sleep” and “the sword may never depart from the house.”