

8. WOMEN

IN THE ISRAELITE STATE

(Part 1)

In this section of the study we shall confine ourselves to the period of the Israelite State, both before and after the Exile. That in itself is an enormous slice of time if we were able to give a full picture of the period from 1050 B.C. down to 400 B.C. But we are not able to do that, and so it is possible to give a survey of the main passages in the Bible on our subject.

The material for the study is largely the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. Anyone familiar with this material will realize immediately that it is concerned mostly with leaders and not the common person. To be sure, there are the Naboths and the Shunamites -- but they are few and far between, and they usually are part of the larger drama within the leadership of the nation. So our picture of women drawn from this period will also mostly be of women in the royal courts, and not the common world.

The Court of David

There are some notable women and some important experiences with women in the life of David that should be surveyed here, although the treatment of each cannot be exhaustive.

Michal

Michal was the daughter of King Saul who was given to David as a wife when David served Saul well (see 1 Samuel 14:49; 18:20-28; 19:11-17; 25:44; 2 Samuel 3:13, 14; 6:16-23; 21:8; 1 Chronicles 15:29). Michal was a princess, but does not appear to have a regal character, due undoubtedly to the times and the circumstances in which she lived (her father and her husband at war, and kingship being new). She was a very passionate woman, eager for prestige, somewhat strangely misunderstanding holiness and its ritual, and ultimately drawn to idolatry even though she believed in Yahweh.

She loved David, her husband. "Michal, Saul's daughter, loved David," we are

told in the text. He was the young, handsome youthful warrior, and she was greatly attracted

to him. Saul had promised Michal in marriage to the one who slew Goliath; when David won the right Saul out of jealousy devised a plan whereby David would be killed by the Philistines--the bride price would require the death of 100 Philistines. David complied, and Saul could not withhold Michal

She delivered David. Saul had David's house surrounded to kill him in the morning, but Michal heard of it and helped David escape through the window. She then used a *teraphim* (household god) to trick the killers. When confronted by Saul she said that David had threatened her if she would not help. Here was Michal's dilemma--she loved and was loyal to David, but she wanted to remain a loyal Saulide.

She forsook David. For the next period life with David became difficult, living in the wilderness with the band of loyal warriors always hiding from Saul. So Michal left David and was joined to Phalti of Gallem who was himself on his way to royal position. This was an illegitimate union since David was alive. When Saul died things changed. David would unite the tribes under himself in a United Monarchy--but he must have Michal back. It would be a major problem for the wife of the reigning king to be with another man. But Michal was glad to come back to David now that he was in the palace. And in one of the most pathetic descriptions we are told that Phalti went after her weeping, but was turned away by Abner. Apparently Michal did not weep over leaving this good man who cared for her deeply. We do not know Michal's feelings or motives; did she actually care that much for David, or did she want the position in court? She could never be David's ideal love, for she had been with Phalti; but as his first wife she could have a better position in the state.

She despised and lost David. If Michal had loved the LORD as much as she seemed to have loved David, she would have survived in her relationship to him. When David moved the ark up to Jerusalem and danced before the LORD with all his might, Michal, watching from a window, despised him. David's actions in this open demonstration shocked her royal dignity. Her words are filled with biting sarcasm when he came home: "How glorious was the king of Israel today, who uncovered himself in the eyes of all the handmaidens of his servants, as one of the vain fellows shamelessly uncovers himself." For Michal there was not the pious affection for the ark that there was for David. Rather, the whole event embarrassed and annoyed her. She had missed the essential point of David's career, that although he had weaknesses and excesses he was a man whose heart beat for God. In the end Michal becomes a

mirror for wives whose prideful sense of personal status and dignity make them demanding and critical of their husbands.

The text says that because of this “Michal the daughter of Saul had no child until the day of her death.” In short, she lived apart from David (2 Sam. 6:16). No doubt the separation was hastened by David’s living with other wives now. She ended her years caring for her sister’s five children, all of whom were ultimately beheaded.

The lesson from David’s marriage to Michal is that misunderstanding arose because of a clash of family loyalties, personal emotions and temperaments, spiritual sensitivities, and purpose for the monarchy. The fault was not all Michal’s--that was shared by Saul and David--but she could have made a difference if her passion for power had been first a passion for the LORD to match David’s. In the final analysis, nothing could have worked to make this a wonderful marriage, because she was caught between two royal families at war. If she had heeded the advice of Psalm 45 and abandoned her father and remained loyal to David, then things would have been different.

Abigail

What a marriage Abigail had. She was beautiful and wise and deeply pious. But she was married to Nabal. He was a fool and evil (1 Sam. 25:3). This word *nabal*, “fool,” as in Proverbs, describes one who is a bear of a man, harsh, rude, and brutal. Nabal was also avaricious and selfish; he was a drunken wretch, unmanageable, stubborn, and ill-tempered. He was also an un-believer, a “son of Belial.” A “fool” is one who is a practical atheist, one who lives as if Yahweh does not exist. Verse 25 plays on his name: “*Nabal* is his name, and folly (*n^ebalah*) is/in with him (or: is his game).”ⁱ Furthermore, as a follower of Saul he rejected David as king.

Abigail met David through a wise action. David was camped nearby and had often helped Nabal’s men in exchange for food. When he sent a kind request to Nabal, he was answered with a rude and blunt refusal. David, being in a mentality of war, thought to destroy and plunder Nabal--an act of violence he later acknowledged was rash and wrong. But it was Abigail who came and pleaded for mercy. She intervened in just the nick of time.

To Abigail’s credit, she returned home to Nabal afterwards, to her wicked partner to take up her bitter lot in life. She did not leave him, nor seek for divorce

from him. In fact, she had saved his neck. But ten days later Nabal's life ended by divine stroke. Death came as the great arbiter or divorcer, and she had no tears of regret. Amid much suffering and difficulty she had kept her vows.

David then "communed with" Abigail (a term to say he sought her in marriage; compare Song 8:8 with 25:39). She married David and entered into a much happier state. Her child was called Chileab, or Daniel (there is a real textual difficulty here, but all evidence points to "Daniel" as the name of the boy; see 1 Chronicles 3:1, Josephus, and the Dead Sea Scrolls). "Daniel" means "God is my vindicator (or judge)," and this certainly would have been how she saw her lot now.

What we learn from Abigail is that there probably were many very unhappy marriage relationships, especially if a wonderful woman was married to such a lout. No doubt her marriage was arranged by a family that was more impressed with his wealth than with his character. But even today such mistakes are made when the man or the woman arranges the marriage independently of the parents--so that does not assure success either. But God would ultimately reward this courageous woman of virtue, who used her brains to spare her husband and find favor with a king.

David's Wives

2 Samuel 3:2-5 lists David's wives and their sons:

"His firstborn was **Amnon** the son of Ahinoam of Jezreel;
his second, Chileab (**Daniel**) the son of Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel; the third, **Absalom** the son of Maacah daughter of Talmai king of Geshur;
the fourth, **Adonijah** the son of Haggith;
the fifth, **Shephatiah** the son of Abital;
and the sixth, **Ithream** the son of David's wife Eglah.

It is interesting that Michal was not listed here; perhaps it was because she forsook David, or was given to Phalti, or had no children. And, of course, Bathsheba was yet to come. Her son **Solomon** would be the heir, as each of the above managed to disqualify himself.

In the Rabbinical literature there is a fascinating passage about how many wives

a king could have. The Law in Deuteronomy 17 said that a king was not to multiply wives to himself. But David had a number of wives, and the Scripture did not criticize him for that as it did Solomon. So in the *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 2:4 the Rabbis ruled on this (ideally, since they had no king), saying, “Neither shall he multiply wives to himself—only eighteen. R. Judah (dissenting) says, He may so multiply to himself, only provided that they do not turn away his heart.” In the continuation of the discussion in the *Talmud* the number eighteen is explained this way: when Nathan rebuked David for his sin, he quoted the LORD as saying, “I gave your master’s house to you . . . and if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more” (12:8). The expression “even more” translates two Hebrew words, “like such, like such,” or something similar. They reasoned that if he had six wives, like such and like such would be twelve more, and so God had approved eighteen wives for David. This is how a slavishly literal interpretation can take over common sense (but then, we still have to explain what God meant). The simple fact of the matter in this passage is that multiple wives in the royal family brought factions and palace intrigue for the throne. We here meet Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah—they would soon be at each other’s throats for the prize.

Bathsheba

In the account of David’s sin in 2 Samuel 11 we are introduced to the beautiful Bathsheba, with whom David would commit adultery, and to whom David would eventually be married, and from whom Solomon would come.

Bathsheba has received a negative report in much preaching and teaching because of the exposure she gave to David “to cause him to sin” (as many say). But that is not the view the Bible presents—if the Bible is allowed to speak. Bathsheba was the daughter of Eliam, who was the son of Ahithophel; she became the wife of Uriah, The Hittite, one of David’s most loyal heroes. She and her family and her husband were God-fearing people, and the references to her in the account bear this out.

The story of the sin is told simply in terms of David’s lapsing into the attitude and action of a pagan king. The narrative tells us that it was a time when kings go forth to war, but David tarried in Jerusalem. He had to lead the armies out to secure the borders each spring; but as king he did not have to go every time. The point of the first verse is that he was where he was not expected to be. In the evening he saw from his rooftop a very beautiful woman washing in her courtyard. We may suspect that it was a warm evening, and with her husband and the army gone with David—so she

thought--she could wash in the courtyard. The city of David was the spur of a hill jutting out south of the temple mount. From the top of the steep little hill, where the palace was, David would have a bird's eye view of his city. People had pools and ritual baths in their courtyards, and inside if they were wealthy enough. They were used with modesty: the ritual baths had roofs over them, and the woman would have attendants that kept her covered until she immersed herself in the water. In short, David would not see a naked woman; but he saw a beautiful woman in a private moment and sent for her.

When David sent for her she came to his rooms he lay with her. Critical to the story is the parenthetical clause in verse 4--"she had purified herself from her uncleanness." This is what we call a disjunctive clause, that is, it is not part of the story sequence--this purifying ritual did not take place after the adultery. Rather, the narrative is at that moment telling us what she had been doing when David saw her from the roof. The washing that he saw, we are now told, was a Levitical purification she was taking in order to go to the temple to worship after she had been through her period (the word for washing is no longer the secular *roheset*, but the religious *mithqaddesheth*). In other words, she in her innocence and integrity was complying with the Law of Moses. She had to wash this way to go to the sanctuary, usually at the very moment of going to the sanctuary (and so not right after the period--she would have bathed normally for that, but now in preparation for entering the holy place, because she had had a period since her last visit, she had to wash in the ritual bath). Thus, David did not only take another man's wife, he took another man's wife while she was preparing to worship the LORD.

What part did Bathsheba have in the sin? Could she have refused the king? The Bible says nothing of all this, but does give us some clues. She no doubt was held culpable for the sin of adultery as David was. She could have refused, perhaps at the risk of her life. But it was not a rape; she did not cry out. Later on we catch a glimpse of her as an ambitious woman, and it may be that at this early point she rationalized that she could rise in the state--and after all it was the king who sent for her. We can only speculate on what went on with her. But we can be sure when the illegitimate child died, she grieved as much as David for the loss. And when Nathan came and named the child Solomon with a personal name "Jedidiah," "truly beloved of Yahweh" (12:25), it was a sign from God that all was well with the sinners, the marriage was blessed, and the child honored as a sign of God's grace and love. This may well imply that Bathsheba as well as David had sought forgiveness and poured out her heart to the LORD. Moreover, her inclusion in the genealogy of Matthew 1 is

another word to us that God's grace had prevailed. But in Samuel the focus is on the sin of David.

The sure word of forgiveness came the moment David confessed--Nathan said, "God has put away your sin." There would be fallout from the sin--the sword would not depart from the house of David. He had acted like a pagan king; there would be rape and revenge and murder in his family. But when the second child was born, God sent the same prophet with the new name as a sign that all was well between them and God. The verse (12:25) uses deliberate ambiguity: "the LORD loved him." Who? The child? David? Then the name was given: Jedidiah, in Hebrew *Y^edidyah*, "truly beloved of Yah." What is so significant about this name is that it is etymologically based on the name of David, for *Dawid* means "beloved." The child is named after the father, confirming the meaning of David's name in relation to God. So the marriage was now legitimate, and the child was legitimate.

One thing that we do learn from all this is that even though there was participation in a grave sin, Bathsheba found assurance for forgiveness like David, and did not let that sin ruin her life. Bathsheba afterwards comes across as a powerful and influential woman with David. In 1 Kings 1:17 Bathsheba went to the aging king and got the assurance that Solomon, her son, would reign after him, instead of Adonijah who had made himself king. At her words, with the help of Nathan, David had Zadok anoint Solomon as king.

Bathsheba also tried to have the maidservant Abishag given to Adonijah in marriage (1 Kings 2). But Solomon saw the plan as an attempt by Adonijah to seize the throne and would have no part in it. Nevertheless, the incident shows the access that the Queen Mother had to Solomon.

ⁱ It is unlikely that the man's name was "Fool," for no mother would name her baby that. There probably was a different verb with the letters sn-b-l in them, such as a word like *nablu*, "onesent," perhaps a godsend. But in time he showed himself to be a fool, and so it was easy to pronounce his name *nabal* with the more appropriate meaning