

# DAVID'S GREATNESS IN HIS SIN AND REPENTANCE

By WALTER VOGELS

WHEN WE search for the meaning of sin and repentance in the bible, we could write a long dissertation on the vocabulary and the theology of these human actions. Alternatively,<sup>1</sup> we could prefer to revive a particular human experience, more in line with the bible itself, which puts us in front of living human persons. An exciting story of sin and repentance can be seen in the life of one of the central biblical figures: king David.<sup>2</sup>

We want to penetrate into the story of David and Bathsheba which is part of the beautiful composition called the Succession Narrative.<sup>3</sup> About the time when this story was written, another biblical writer, the Yahwist, was writing his own narrative, in which we find another experience of sin and repentance, the story of Adam and Eve. After reading the stories of David and Adam, one cannot fail to be impressed by the similarities between the two.<sup>4</sup> The experience of Adam and Eve is a symbol of the experience of each

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a commentary on 2 Samuel 11,2-12,25, which describes a Watergate cover-up in Jerusalem, not to be confused with the more obvious biblical Watergate in Nehemiah 8.

<sup>2</sup> "The story of David and Bathsheba has long aroused both dismay and astonishment; dismay that king David, with his manifest piety, could stoop to such an act, and astonishment that the bible narrates it with such unrelenting openness, although the person involved is David the great and celebrated king, the type of the Messiah". H. W. Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, (London 1964), p 309.

<sup>3</sup> Besides the commentaries on the books of Samuel, many studies are consecrated to this story: J. Blenkinsopp, 'Theme and Motif in the Succession History (2 Sam 11, 2ff) and the Yahwist Corpus', in *Vetus Testamentum Supplements XV* (1966), pp 44-57; W. Brueggemann, 'David and his theologian', in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (CBQ), 30 (1968), pp 156-181; 'On Trust and Freedom. A Study of faith in the Succession Narrative', in *Interpretation*, 26 (1972), pp 3-19; J. W. Flanagan, 'Court History or Succession Document? A study of 2 Sam 9-20 and 1 Kg, 1-2', in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 91 (1972), pp 172-181; J. J. Jackson, 'David's Throne: Patterns in the Succession Story', in *Canadian Journal of Theology*, 11 (1965), pp 183-195; G. Von Rad, 'The Beginnings of Historical Writing in Ancient Israel', in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and other Essays*, (London, 1966), pp 166-204; R. N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative. A Study of II Sam 9-20; I Kings 1 and 2* (London, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> Cf J. Blenkinsopp, *art. cit.*, pp 44-57; W. Brueggemann, *art. cit.*, CBQ, pp 156-181.

one of us. The story of David has many similarities, but is different too. In our reflection we would like to emphasize the particular greatness of David in his sin and in his repentance.

The story of David's sin comes at a special moment in his life. He has arrived at the peak of his career. From a little shepherd, he has become a king, *the* king of Israel. All the texts immediately preceding our event insist on this: David has conquered his enemies; he is successful in his international policies: 'Wherever David went, Yahweh gave him victory'; but he is also much appreciated in his internal national policies: 'David ruled over all Israel, administering law and justice to all his people'. Besides the achievements of the present, David's future also looked hopeful and stable after the promise of Nathan. In this oracle we find a summary of his success:

Yahweh Sabaoth says this: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be leader of my people Israel; I have been with you on all your expeditions; I have cut off all your enemies before you. I will give you fame as great as the fame of the greatest on earth . . . Your House and your sovereignty will always stand secure before me and your throne be established for ever (2 Sam 7, 8-9, 16).

It is precisely at this high point in his life that something happens which will change David's life, and darken that bright future promised to him. This event is a dividing-line in his life. It has been said that the period before is 'David under the blessing', and the period after is 'David under the curse'.<sup>5</sup> When everything looks too promising and goes too well, the danger becomes very real for a man: 'At the turn of the year, the time when kings go campaigning, David sent Joab . . . . David however remained in Jerusalem' (2 Sam 11, 1). We have to be careful not to overload the content of this verse, but it seems to suggest a contrast. Normally the kings went to war themselves with their men, like David used to do.<sup>6</sup> But now, since everything is so secure, David sends his men, and he remains comfortably in his palace in Jerusalem. The fact that he stays behind is going to play an important role in the story. Something has changed in David; he is no longer the man he was.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf R. A. Carlson, *David, the chosen King: A Traditio-Historical Approach to the second Book of Samuel* (Uppsala, 1964).

<sup>6</sup> Cf 2 Sam 8, 3; 10, 17; 21, 17. It is interesting to read at the end of the story how David is invited by Joab, perhaps not without irony, to lead his army to victory and so to have the honours (2 Sam 12, 26-31).

*David's sin* (2 Sam 11, 2-27)

'It happened, late one afternoon . . .'. It happened, simply like that. Nothing was done to provoke the event. Life is unpredictable, you never know what will happen next. But this 'it happened' is to change the whole life of David; he will never be the same again. 'He saw from the roof a woman bathing: the woman was very beautiful'. David, the great ideal king, is also a very human person. Like any other man, he feels attracted by the beauty of that woman; he himself was very handsome. The great king is also a man of great passion. He sees the woman and is so taken by her beauty that this becomes his only desire, even though he possesses everything he could possibly dream of. This one desire becomes everything for him. All the rest disappears. He does not see the consequences, the injustices, the possible loss of his reputation. So he gives in to his desire: 'he slept with her'.

It is tempting to stress here the similarity with Adam's or everyman's sin. Adam and Eve also had everything. They were living in a paradise, where everything was given to them, 'You may eat indeed of all the trees in the garden'; but there was that one tree which was not for them. And this now becomes the temptation; that one tree becomes everything for them. They do not think about the consequences any more; how they could lose everything. When the serpent asked the woman: 'Did God really say you were not to eat from any of the trees in the garden', he summarizes what temptation is. They could eat of every tree except one. 'Since I cannot eat from this one, I cannot eat from all'. So the whole attention is directed towards this one tree. 'The woman saw that the tree was good to eat . . . she took some . . . and ate it. She gave some also to her husband'. A beautiful description of the gradual evolution from interior desire to exterior act.

The same growth of sin in David's heart is described in our story: 'David saw a woman . . . David made inquiries about this woman . . . David sent messengers and had her brought . . . and he slept with her'. But the action now completed has created a new situation that cannot be changed: 'The woman conceived and sent word to David, I am with child'. How to cope with this good news, that new life is expected, that a child will be born! The same news can sound differently in different situations.

David, for whom Bathsheba had become the only desire in his life, now wants to save his reputation, save the external appearances. A perfect cover-up plan is devised. The whole royal machinery,

which was for the service of the people, is now to be used by the king to save his own reputation.

A first cover-up is planned, a *clean* one. Let Uriah come back from the war; he deserves a rest: a nice present from the king for this valiant soldier. He can enjoy some time with his wife; and everything will appear normal when the child is born. But Uriah, according to the rules of the Holy War, 'slept by the palace door . . . and did not go down to his house'. In his answer to David, he explains his reasons. Did Uriah suspect the infidelity of his wife and David? The text does not say. But his answer must have somehow disturbed the conscience of David: 'Are not the ark and the men of Israel and Judah lodged in tents; and my master Joab and the bodyguard of my lord, are they not in the open fields? Am I to go to my house, then, and eat and drink and sleep with my wife?' David must have felt uncomfortable with this answer, he who remained in Jerusalem while the others were at war; he who slept with the wife of one of his soldiers fighting for him. 'As Yahweh lives, and as you yourself live, I will do no such thing!' Strange to hear a foreigner like Uriah, the Hittite, calling upon Yahweh and telling the king of Israel that he is going to be faithful to the observance of the rules of the Holy War, which David had invited him to break!

So David has to devise a second cover-up plan, this time a *dirty* one: a royal invitation to a banquet with the king. Uriah cannot refuse this! 'The next day David invited him to eat and drink in his presence . . .', but ' . . . made him drunk'. At least Uriah might forget his scruples about the Holy War and go home and sleep with his wife. The second trick is as unsuccessful as the first: 'he did not go down to his house'.

David decides on a third cover-up, but now a *criminal* one. This will be a final solution. Uriah must disappear,<sup>7</sup> but without implicating the king. Since David has messengers and commanders at his disposal, this can be done easily. A letter is sent to Joab; and the irony is that Uriah is carrying his own death-warrant with him. 'Station Uriah in the thick of the fight, and then fall back behind him so that he may be struck down and die'. Uriah must be isolated so that only he will die and other casualties will be avoided. Everything is planned perfectly. Uriah dies; but 'the army suffered casualties, including some of David's bodyguard'. Joab, the com-

<sup>7</sup> Compare the attitude of the Pharaoh of Egypt towards Sarai and Abraham (Gen 12,10-20; cf also Gen 20; 26,1-11).

manding officer, has succeeded in the execution of the king's request. Uriah is dead; but Joab is afraid of his failure in battle, and all the losses he has encountered. He can now blackmail David, if he should be accused of adopting the wrong war tactics. If Joab has to cover-up for David, David has to do the same for Joab.<sup>8</sup>

Joab sent David a full account of the battle. To the messenger he gave this order: 'When you have finished telling the king all the details of the battle, the king's anger may be provoked . . . If so, you are to say, Your servant Uriah the Hittite has been killed too'.

What Joab had foreseen is exactly what happened. 'David was angry with Joab'. Why was this officer so imprudent to go near the ramparts? This was a tactical error that caused a great loss to the army. But there is one thing which can change the anger of David, which can justify tactical errors, which can justify the loss of other men: 'and your servant Uriah the Hittite was killed too'. This one thing now justifies all the rest; all the rest has no importance. David expects that his reputation will be safe, and Joab his position: 'Then David said to the messenger, Say this to Joab, Do not take the matter to heart; the sword devours now one and now another . . . That is the way to encourage him'. This is one of the most cruel abuses of his authority; everything becomes good or bad as long as it suits him.

And now the road is wide open, there are no more obstacles. 'When Uriah's wife heard that her husband Uriah was dead, she mourned for her husband. When the period of mourning was over, David sent to have her brought to his house; she became his wife and bore him a son'.

Yet this is not the end: the last word belongs to Someone else: 'But what David had done displeased Yahweh'. David, who had been blessed by Yahweh, to whom Yahweh had entrusted his people, has misused this trust. He has planned everything without taking Yahweh into account.<sup>9</sup> The only person in this story who ever speaks of Yahweh is Uriah the Hittite.

<sup>8</sup> ' . . . that Joab was faced with a difficult assignment; that having carried it out, at the possible cost of his military reputation, he felt the need to defend himself by a kind of blackmail; that the message which he sent had to be carefully worded in order not to arouse the suspicion of the messenger'. R. N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative* p 34.

<sup>9</sup> 'The succession (narrative) is the first effort at "secular" history . . . David is the fullest expression of that freedom to cause historical change by political choice . . . For all its stress on human activity and human freedom, for all its willingness to let events take their course, this kind of history cannot be written without reference to Yahweh at the crucial places . . .'. W. Brueggemann, 'On Trust and Freedom', p 9.

This is the fine description of David's sin. We could analyse the whole story and make a long list of all the possible sins: interior adultery, exterior adultery, sin against the rules of the Holy War, making Uriah drunk, manslaughter. We could even see some of the aggravating circumstances that worsen the case. We could even ask ourselves, how many times . . . ? But all this is not going to help us realize what sin really is.

The text shows us that sin is blindness. David no longer saw what he possessed; he could only see what he did not possess, and this blindness enslaved him. He could not get out of the situation. The further he went, the more complicated it became: there seemed no way back, without losing. The only way forward seemed to be to get more deeply entangled. It is a deed he did on his own, abusing the trust Yahweh had put in him. But he did not escape Yahweh, who sees everything.<sup>10</sup>

*David sees again and is set free (12, 1-15)*<sup>11</sup>

It is difficult to build up and maintain a perfect cover; sooner or later something will leak out, and perhaps someone may have the courage to proclaim the truth to the person who no longer sees. In Jerusalem someone happened to hear about David's action, someone who could not be blackmailed and who was not anxious about his own survival: Nathan, the prophet.<sup>12</sup> He was with David in his success (2 Sam 7), but he also comes to David in his sin.

Nathan presents the king with the case of a rich and a poor man in the same town. The rich man had everything he wanted, 'flocks and herds in great abundance'. The poor man had only one thing, a ewe lamb which he treated like a daughter. It happened that a traveller came to stay. The rich man, instead of taking one of his own flock, took the lamb of the poor man. Through the abuse of his authority and power, the rich man exploits the poor man, who has no defence, even when he loses his most precious possession. This makes

<sup>10</sup> ' . . . tension seems to have existed in the mind of the author of the Succession Narrative: he believed that a man's evil deeds lead, by a natural process, to their own evil consequences; but he also believed in the working of a divine providence which is beyond man's understanding'. R. N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative*, p 63.

<sup>11</sup> H. Seebass, 'Nathan and David in II Sam. 12', *Z.A.W.*, 86 (1974), pp 203-211; U. Simon, 'The Poor Man's Ewe-lamb. An Example of a juridical Parable', in *Biblica*, 48 (1967), pp 207-242.

<sup>12</sup> 'David is brought low first by the courage of Uriah, and second by Nathan's rebuke; he is brought low because there are free men in this country under the king and because there is a God over the king'; quotation from Z. Adar in U. Simon, *art. cit.*, p 211.

the injustice of the rich man even worse.

And David's reaction is immediate. The king, known for 'administering law and justice to all his people' (2 Sam 8, 15), sees very clearly in this case. 'David's anger flared up against the man'. We have already seen that anger of David boiling up when something goes wrong: when, through Joab's mistake, many soldiers died. David knows that the action of the rich man is not pleasing to Yahweh. As Uriah had requested respect for the rules of the Holy War, 'As Yahweh lives', now David also; and for the first time in our story, he appeals to Yahweh: 'As Yahweh lives'. What should be done about such a case is very simple in his mind: 'the man who did this deserves to die! He must take sevenfold restitution for the lamb' (v 5-6). There is disagreement between the different texts. Some read 'sevenfold',<sup>13</sup> meaning a complete restitution, which seems to fit the context better. David in a spontaneous cry for justice demands more for the man than he deserves. Even if the offence is shocking, the death-penalty seems very harsh. If we keep 'fourfold restitution', then David would apply here the penalty prescribed by the law in similar cases.<sup>14</sup>

In every parable there is light and darkness. This is also the case for David. The example of the lamb fits beautifully for the man who was once a shepherd, and who has now become the shepherd of Israel (2 Sam 7, 7-8). Some interesting details of the parable refer to David's own case: the ewe lamb that grew up with the poor man: 'eating his bread, drinking from his cup, sleeping on his breast', could refer to the 'eating', 'drinking' of Uriah at David's table, the 'sleeping' of David with Bathsheba, and the refusal of Uriah to sleep with his wife.

David sees very clearly in this case, and at the same time he does not see at all. David sees very clearly what is right or wrong in the lives of others, but he does not see his own life. We are better judges of the lives of others than of our own lives. Since sin is blindness, David cannot see any more, until somebody else opens his eyes: 'You are the man'. Nathan, by projecting David's action outside him, brings David to the light. He now can apply his own verdict to himself. In a similar manner, Adam and Eve, after their sin,

<sup>13</sup> Cf LXX (cf Prov 6, 29-31); and Gen 4,15.

<sup>14</sup> 'At all events, the reading "fourfold" must be taken (as most exegetes in fact do) to be secondary - and, we may add, post-deuteronomic: an alteration of the original 7 to fit Exod 21, 37, probably inspired by the fact that David later lost four of his sons, 12, 18; 13, 28f.; 18, 14f; and I Kings 2, 25'. R. A. Carlson, *David, the chosen king*, p 156.

saw it in a clearer light: 'then the eyes of both of them were opened'.

The first step, then, of all repentance is to accept the light, no matter how painful it may be. 'I have sinned against Yahweh'. In this short answer, David's greatness appears once again. He could have chosen many different attitudes. He could have continued his game of refusing to see. Could Nathan prove his statement? Were there any witnesses ready enough to testify, as the law requested (Num 35,30; Deut 17,6)? The king could have felt secure enough, nobody would dare to speak. But David is willing to see; he prefers the light. Not so Adam and Eve, who childishly prefer to hide: 'they hid from Yahweh God among the trees of the garden'; they are afraid to face the new reality.

David could have chosen another way out. Even if the text does not say much about the feelings of the other actors of the drama, one can guess that they were not all guiltless. David could have blamed Bathsheba. Was she not the cause of it all, by bathing on the roof-top? When 'David sent messengers and had her brought', she did not seem to refuse or to resist. On the contrary, 'she came to him'. She does not seem to have been as innocent as the ewe lamb of the parable, or as Susanna (Dan 13). When she became pregnant, she seems to have been happy about it. 'I am with child!'<sup>15</sup> David could also have blamed Joab, who did not offer any resistance to the king's requests and who, through his misdeeds, caused the death of a large number of people. One can always find others to accuse in order to excuse oneself, but David accepts full responsibility for his action: 'I have sinned against Yahweh' (v 13). Compare his attitude with Adam's, who, after hiding and being discovered, tries to escape in this way: 'It was the woman you put with me'; similarly Eve says: 'the serpent tempted me . . .'

David could have continued playing the game to the bitter end, not only by refusing to see, but by remaining in his slavery. Throughout the affair, he had become more and more deeply entangled; so he could have solved this new situation in a simple way. Nathan could have been the next to disappear. With the royal machinery at his command, it would not have been difficult to silence or to kill this trouble-maker. Other prophets had experienced this solution: the death-threat for Elijah, the expulsion of Amos, the imprison-

<sup>15</sup> ' . . . we might construe her "I am with child" (11, 5; cf Hawah's Gen 4, 1) as more a cry of triumph than an S.O.S. signal. We simply do not know whether she was a silent accomplice in the death of her husband, but there is no *indication* that her new situation was distasteful to her', J. Blenkinsopp *art. cit.*, p 52.



ment of Jeremiah, death for John the Baptist.<sup>16</sup>

David had the courage to stop his dangerous game, to accept reality, to prefer light to blindness and freedom to slavery: 'I was wrong'. Only the man who accepts that he was wrong can be forgiven. 'Yahweh, for his part, forgives your sin'. David, in his judgment on the cruel rich man, had decided that he should die and do perfect restitution. Thus David had chosen his own death-penalty according to the law (Deut 22,22). But God forgives completely: 'you are not to die'. We see again the similarity with the story of Adam and Eve, who were also to die, but whose penalty was reduced. He will live. Life will go on, but with certain consequences which may at times make life seem more difficult than death.

The first of these bitter after-tastes was concerned with the child that David was expecting. 'Yet because you have outraged Yahweh by doing this, the child that is born to you is to die'. Why is it that, after complete forgiveness, there is a *but*? It certainly cannot mean that the child has to die because it is guilty, or as a substitute for his father. As David cannot benefit from his sin, this child cannot be an heir to his throne. When David slept with the woman and created new life, the woman did not belong to him, but to Uriah. The child cannot belong to David. He cannot enrich himself through his sin, and in a sense, justice is done to Uriah.

#### *The penance of David (12, 15-17)*

The child fell gravely ill. 'David pleaded with Yahweh for the child; he kept a strict fast and went home and spent the night on the bare ground, covered with sacking'. In his desire for the child to live, and in his feelings of guilt, David hopes that Yahweh may change. 'Who knows? Perhaps Yahweh will take pity on me and the child will live'. David fulfils a ritual of prayer and penance, humiliating himself to the ground in complete self-abasement. He is not ashamed of this humiliation, even if public opinion does not think it right for a king. 'The officials of his household came and stood round him, to get him to rise from the ground'. But David refuses, he does not care what they think. Before God, the king is like any other man, conscious of his guilt and his need. David now 'spent the night on the bare ground', as Uriah and his soldiers had done (11, 9. 11).

<sup>16</sup> Cf 1 Kg 19, 2; Amos 7, 12-12; Jer 32, 2-3; Mt 14, 3ff. For this aspect in the life of the prophets, cf W. Vogels, *Le Prophete, un homme de Dieu*, (Tournai, 1973), ch III, 'La Souffrance du Prophète', pp 75-97.

We recognize David's strength of character. Like anyone else he danced before the ark of Yahweh (2 Sam 6, 16), though some people thought his behaviour incompatible with the royal dignity. 'What a fine reputation the king of Israel has won himself today, displaying himself under the eyes of his servant's maids, as any buffoon might display himself!' (2 Sam 6, 20) David's answer casts light on his mourning for this child: 'I was dancing for Yahweh, not for them. As Yahweh lives, who chose me . . . I shall dance before Yahweh and demean myself even more' (2 Sam 6, 21-22).

David does not need his royal dignity and power. He is here like any man, pleading for life against death. He is a free man, he does what he thinks is right, and not what is pleasing in the eyes of the officials of his household.

*And life goes on* (12, 18-25)

But 'on the seventh day the child died'. Seven long days of fasting and prayer, of hopefully expecting the impossible. The number seven is very meaningful in the story; David asked for 'sevenfold restitution' from the rich man; Bathsheba, which means 'the daughter of seven', was the boy's mother; and David was the one chosen above his seven brothers: 'Jesse presented his seven sons to Samuel, but Samuel said to Jesse, Yahweh has not chosen these' (1 Sam 16, 10). Nobody dares to tell David the truth. If the king fasted like he did while his child was alive, what is he going to do now that the child is dead! 'He will do something desperate'.

But David surprised everybody. 'David got up from the ground, bathed and anointed himself and put on fresh clothes. Then he went into the sanctuary of Yahweh and prostrated himself'. David accepted God's decision, 'On returning to his house, he asked for food to be set before him, and ate', because life goes on. And again his attitude gives scandal, because now he should accomplish all the complicated rituals for mourning. 'His officers said, Why are you acting like this?' David's answer is the answer of a free man, who can face up to life again. 'But now he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him but he cannot come back to me'. Nothing can be changed now.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> 'David . . . comes as close as any person in Israel to making a break with the pattern of *homo religiosus*. In contrast to Saul he manifests little bondage to religious conventions. This is nowhere more clearly expressed than in the pathos of 2 Sam 12, 15-23, in which he grieves for his dying son, but when death is certain he accepts that boundary to his life without undue agony or resentment and certainly is not immobilized by it . . .' W. Brueggemann, *art. cit.*, p 7.

And so life goes on, not by dwelling on the past, but by looking into the future. 'David consoled his wife Bathsheba. He went to her and slept with her. She conceived and gave birth to a son whom she named Solomon'. Whatever he had done in the past, David dared to lift up his eyes and face people and carry on. In the first act of the drama, David was living his own life under the eyes of Yahweh, who was displeased with what David did; now this new beginning depends on David's own decision, but again under Yahweh; this time 'Yahweh loved him' (David's son Solomon).

David is now assured of his pardon. David fell, but got up again enriched by his experience. He is great in his courage to go on with life. He could have been paralysed by the loss of this child, which he felt as a great punishment, and say like Cain, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear' (Gen 4, 13). Or he could have lost all hope for the future, without courage to face his own people, Bathsheba, Joab and the others. He could have abdicated, or even worse abdicated from life itself, like Judas after his sin. David wants to live, he wants to go ahead, whatever others think or say or do.

But the life that lies ahead of him is never going to be the same as it was. Sin has been a reality in his life, and he is going to carry the consequences of it with him. It just cannot be wiped out of his life.

Sin changes something in the course of human destiny. The two different biblical schools of thought express the same reality each in their own way. The wisdom teachers, writing on human experience, repeat it over and over; 'The man who digs a pit falls into it, the stone comes back on him that rolls it' (Prov 26, 27; cf 21, 7). Life seems to take revenge. The prophets and the deuteronomic school, basing themselves on salvation history, will express the same truth by saying that Yahweh punishes the sinner.

This is what David is going to experience in the new period of his life. A later writer has made this view more explicit in our text, by putting in the mouth of Nathan a kind of *vaticinium ex eventu*.<sup>18</sup> Adultery and murder have been the two worst actions in David's conduct. This now is exactly what David will witness in his own family.<sup>19</sup> Even the mightiest do not escape Yahweh's justice.

<sup>18</sup> The solemn declaration of a prophet has brought into prominence the motive of retribution which pervades unseen the whole work. The *jus talionis*, so often secretly at work in history, is here prophetically revealed as the personal activity of the Lord of History against the adulterer. The whole history of David can indeed, be in some sense understood as the history of the punishment for this one transgression'. G. Von Rad, *loc. cit.*, p 196.

<sup>19</sup> 'The story begins with the major motifs which dominate and alternate throughout, such as life and death, man and woman, love and hatred. To these we may add honour and disrespect, courage and cowardice, modesty and shamelessness, restraint and insolence', J. J. Jackson, *art. cit.*, pp 185-186.

In the long Succession Narrative we see the struggle between the different sons of David, a struggle for power without compassion, where the only law is violence. David will lose one son after the other, Amnon (2 Sam 13, 23-38), Absalom (2 Sam 18, 9-18), and Adonijah (1 Kg 2, 12-25). 'You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword . . . and killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. So now the sword will never be far from your house . . .'

But besides this, David also witnesses all kinds of sexual disorders in his family. Amnon violates Tamar his sister. Absalom takes his father's concubines: 'So they pitched a tent for Absalom on the housetop, and in the sight of all Israel Absalom went to his father's concubines'. Was it perhaps the same roof where our whole story started? Adonijah also comes to his end because of a woman: he seeks to marry Abishag, who had been David's concubine.<sup>20</sup> All these events became a painful reminder for David of his own adultery. 'I will stir up evil for you out of your own house. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to your neighbour, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. You worked in secret, I will work this in the face of all Israel and in the face of the sun'. This is the heavy price David has to pay for his sin.

Reflecting on the whole story, we have seen the human experience of a great man. David's emotions were very strong, so strong that they finally overpowered him and brought him to blindness and slavery.<sup>21</sup> He was great because he dared to accept full responsibility for what he did. He was great above all in saying yes to a new life, a life that would be different and marked by the consequences of his actions. David lives his life as a free person; God is not responsible for his actions. God is present as a guide (11, 27; 12, 24). 'A man's heart plans out his way, but it is Yahweh who makes his steps secure'.<sup>22</sup> Yahweh has trusted David, and even after David abused this trust, God continued to trust him. And David trusted God so much that he dared to return to him.

By way of personal conclusion, one could read and meditate on Psalm 51. The biblical tradition has understood this psalm as reflecting the feelings and prayer 'of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him because he had been with Bathsheba'.

<sup>20</sup> Cf 2 Sam 13, 1-22; 16, 22; 11, 2; 1 Kg 2, 12-25 'Yet chapter 13 and its sequel form a far truer consequence of David's undisciplined act, for here he could not control the passions of his sons, any more than his own'. J. J. Jackson, *art. cit.*, p 189.

<sup>21</sup> '(David) may at times overlive but he will not be tempted to underlive'. W. Brueggemann, *art. cit.*, CBQ, p 494.

<sup>22</sup> Prov 16, 9; cf 19, 21; 21, 2. 'David and the other actors in the narrative have enormous power and freedom to act, but they are not free to act as though Yahweh were not there'. W. Brueggemann, *art. cit.*, p 13; '(God) is much more the *creator of a context* for human freedom and responsibility than a *disruptor of events*', p 18.