

“On Conscientious Objection”
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Based on 2 Samuel 11:1-17
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We have been reading along for several weeks now in 2 Samuel of King David’s exploits, and the remarkable blessings God bestowed on him, most importantly that “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.” It is also recorded several times how “The Lord gave victory to David everywhere he went.” On one hand, he seems to be a religious hero for the ages: wise, courageous, bold, and faithful. But on the other hand, to a 21st century sensibility, King David can be seen as something of a ruthless dictator, the recipient of a divine mandate over a theocratic empire, someone we should not particularly aspire to model ourselves after. Be that as it may, from the perspective of the writers of the Israelite history, his efforts on behalf of God are inscrutable, no matter how violent his methods. For example, after defeating the Moabites, we are unflinchingly told that he made them lie down on the ground, and, after measuring them off with a cord, killed two out of every three who didn’t measure up. But we are also treated to a paradoxical side of David and stories of his more generous and contrite side, such as when he shows remarkable mercy to the grandson of King Saul, restoring to him his grandfather’s ancestral lands and making a permanent place for him at the king’s table.

And yet, as has been often observed, the recordkeepers do not fail to record the story we just heard, often referred to generously as David committing adultery with Bathsheba, but more accurately, David raping and disgracing Bathsheba, then making her a widow. It seems that as long as you are doing it for God and country, the ends justify the means, but when it is for your own sake, you don't get off so lightly. But in a theocracy, where the boundaries of politics and religious, matters of church and state, the king's power and God's power are effectively blurred, where to draw the line between what is done on behalf of self and state? This seems to have been at the heart of David's troubles, and it may often be at the heart of our own, but in David's case we can almost forgive him for not being able to discern how close he was to the line given how God has treated him thus far. We, however, have benefited too much from hindsight in general, and this story in particular, to confuse our politics with God's. Or at least we should pray so.

The storyteller makes very clear from the start that something is amiss and trouble is afoot in Judah. David's general Joab is on the battlefield conquering the Ammonites, but, it says, "David remained in Jerusalem." This is a bad sign. You see, in this time, one of the king's most important duties was to lead the troops in battle. There are various theories about why David stayed behind. Perhaps he was bored with battle and believed that God would bring Israel victory even if he were not on the front lines. Perhaps he was aging and really not up to the task anymore. But for whatever reason, his staying in Jerusalem sets the stage for the rest of the

story. What goes unsaid, but which I think is key, is that David, for whatever reason he has stayed behind, needs something to conquer and someone to command. That something is Bathsheba, and if he can't command his troops, he'll command his servants to bring the battle to him. David is a man used to getting his own way.

What is also unsaid but curious is why David feels the need to cover up Bathsheba's pregnancy. He is, after all, the king. It would not be difficult to deny it; there were no DNA paternity tests in those days. He is not trying to cover up his sin from God. What does he have to gain? One possible explanation is that David wants to save face with his military. I mean, it really wouldn't do if all your subordinates were wondering if you were romancing, I mean raping, their wives while they were fighting your battles! It wouldn't be very good for morale, now would it? And although this former scenario seems likely, we could also give David the benefit of the doubt that he was concerned for the reputation and welfare of poor Bathsheba since the punishment for adultery was pretty harsh (death, actually) and levied only against the woman. Had she not become pregnant, who need know but the king's servants? But being with child, the proof was in the oven.

And so the stage is set for Uriah's return to Jerusalem and David's attempts to make the child appear to be of its own father. And in the category of "no good deed goes unpunished," Uriah makes his noble, if naive and fatal error: he decides to be a conscientious objector. Despite David's best efforts, Uriah will not take the

bait and so David must resort to a political and military solution that earns him God's enmity and trouble that will follow him the rest of his life. More on that next week.

For tonight, let us take a look at the issues raised by Uriah's solidarity with his band of brothers, and the ark of the covenant, who remained in tents on the battle field whilst he was summoned to his wife's bed. Uriah objects, out of conscience, to treating himself to relative luxury while his mates are suffering relative deprivation. It is not so much that it would have been wrong to do so, but more that it would not have been right to do it. Thus, his conscientious objection is all the more noble because it was not born simply of choosing between right and wrong, but because it was choosing between right and righter.

This, of course, is what distinguishes Uriah and condemns David, for David too was faced with the very same decision, whether or not to sleep with Bathsheba, but on top of the fact that his decision was clearer, that is, between right and wrong, he chose poorly. The king is shown up by the foot soldier whose conscience was his guide. It is no wonder that David had to have him killed. Now it seems to me that the highest standards are required if you are the king, your reign is synonymous with God's, and you wield absolute power, yet Uriah is the one applying the higher standards. He is well within his rights to make a conjugal visit to Bathsheba, but conscientiously objects out of solidarity with the king's own struggle and the king's own men. David is far outside his rights to require a

conjugal visit by Bathsheba, yet cannot, out of solidarity with the same struggle and the same men, refrain from imposing his will and power. The ancient lesson emphasized by writers bold enough to tell the full story of their kings, warts and all, is that the significant difference between David and his footsoldier is that Uriah understands, like a good king should, that just because he *can* do something does not mean that he *must* do it.

Which brings us to modern times in the same Middle East, and the same context of war and power and decisionmaking. Perhaps like you, I have spent the last couple of weeks lamenting the destruction of lives and property in Lebanon. And I have been concerned, perhaps like you, with the sabre rattling between Iran and the West. And I have been saddened, perhaps like you, by the continuing loss of life of both Iraqis and their occupiers or liberators, depending on how you view them. All of this is taking place in the very lands roamed by David and his soldiers and other Biblical characters, in the very region where the noble Uriah was sacrificed to save the face of a king.

Perhaps it will seem naive of me to suggest that the lessons learned in the comparison of Uriah and David are applicable here. But it would seem even more naive of me were I to say that it is David's choice that applies to these conflicts because to say so would imply that these are mere matters of right and wrong, determining which is which, and acting to the contrary of Israel's flawed king. But we all know that these situations are far more complex than simplistic

characterizations of good and evil, oppressor and victim, saint and sinner. These real life situations all have historical roots which are watered and fed by current political realities on all sides and which are bearing fruit in violence coming from every side. And so we must turn to Uriah's conscientious objection to speak to the situation of his homeland in which its leaders are faced, like he was, with the choice between right and righter.

I call it the choice between right and righter because in each situation you can find some justification for the violence. You can debate just how much justification and whether it is really enough, but that is not the point. The point is that human rights, self-determination, and national security are issues for all sides, making the issue one of right and righter. Let us briefly take the current Israeli response to Hezbollah activity as an example. Israel, as a responsible nation, has every right to make its border safe for its citizens and to do what is reasonable to protect them. Leaving aside just for a moment questions of proportionality, an Israeli response to Hezbollah's on-going incursions into their territory and their violent attacks perpetrated on its citizens is justified. This is like Uriah's right to sleep in his own house with his own wife.

But returning to the decision of whether or not to strike back, or at the very least to the issue of the proportionality of its response, Israel must consider Uriah's issue of "right versus righter." Is there a greater and more noble, not to mention more successful, approach than acting on their right to protect themselves? Just

because they can respond, and respond with overwhelming and indiscriminate force, do they have to? Or can they act out of a human solidarity that transcends national boundaries, and reach deeply into the fear which grips their own nation to refrain from inflicting that fear on others? Do they have the faith to conscientiously object to violence because it is the righter thing to do even though they may suffer the consequences? Do we have that faith?

Friends, the name, Uriah, means “Yahweh is a light.” Let me suggest that applying a set of Uriah Principles will demonstrate that to be the truth, that it will demonstrate that you have learned that nothing begets violence faster than violence, that resorting to war is not only a failure of diplomacy but a faithless act of despair that says that God can do nothing so we must take matters into our own hands. May our conscientious objecting, our choices of righter over right, in human solidarity with those with whom we may have nothing in common except our mutual enmity, show that God is a light, that Christ is a light to the world, leading us to the peace God so ardently desires for all. Amen.