Heart of God, Heart of Oak: 
*A Study of Two Heroes and Their Gods*

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In the bright hall of Zeus upon Olympus 
the other gods were all at home, and Zeus, 
the father of gods and men, made conversation. 
For he had meditated on Aigisthos, dead 
by the hand of Agamemnon's son, Orestes, 
and spoke his thought aloud before them all:

“My word, how mortals take the gods to task! 
All their afflictions come from us, we hear. 
And what of their own failings? Greed and folly 
double the suffering in the lot of man.”!

The human beings whose gods dwelt on Olympus are probably not the first and certainly not the last to blame the deities for the vagaries of human existence, to ponder the question of the gods' role in their lives. The biblical stories of Saul and David raise the question in the minds of these characters and in our minds as we watch the epic unfold. How to factor the
problem of powerful deities and free human beings, of finite hands in reach of infinite resources is a dilemma beloved of poets, and we can ponder the problem both fruitfully and pleasantly in the company of those who tell of early Hebraic and Greek heroes.

The Biblical Story: Background

For our purposes, the story of David begins in the encounter between God and King Saul (I Sam. 15). God, commander-in-chief of the Israelite forces, had commanded Saul to battle the Amalekites and when victorious to exterminate all life: men, women, children, livestock. The sound of lowing animals and the sight of the Amalekite king Agag still upright suggests to God that Saul has disobeyed orders. And for this disobedience (perhaps combined with Saul's failures in chapters 13 and 14) God rejects Saul as king and announces that he has already chosen a successor. Royal transitions are often awkward, especially if the incumbent survives, and this case is no exception. Several years and several chapters later, Saul is still clinging to his throne, to the external signs of power, while David has become, by degrees, king of the people once ruled by Saul.

Before turning to David, and perhaps so that we can understand God and David better, it is worth examining with a little more attention the cause of Saul's rejection. Our storyteller gives us the gist of it by judicious use of pronouns and adjectives. But first we need some background.

The backdrop for the battle with the Amalekites is both remote and immediate. The struggle for the patch of land called Israel in both ancient and modern times serves as warp for virtually every significant historical experience its dwellers have. The experience of being given the land, being drawn or pushed from it, and then struggling to reclaim it or repel invaders is a dominant storyline in Jewish tradition. And the land is more than acreage and livelihood, more even than security from oppression. The land is tangible proof of a bond between God and people. If the people live in fidelity to God's law they will dwell secure in his land; if they disobey, they will be taken from the land or it from them. Such a belief, whether or not it seems naive or superstitious to us, is one of the main supports for the long opus (including the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings) in which the Saul and David materials occur, and we must accept it at least temporarily as part of the story we are being told.

And more proximately, the Amalekite problem rises at a particularly crucial time (late eleventh century BC) for Saul and the Israelites, whom we meet, their backs to the wall, fighting for their survival as an independent people. Their foe seems insignificant: five Philistine city-states located along a few miles of coast; but the Philistines have a mighty technology in the smelting of iron, and they appear to have a monopoly on it. The
Philistine threat will pervade the reign of Saul and may be seen as one of the catalysts in Israel's acquisition of a king.

In the period between the exodus from Egypt and the gathering of Israel's modest empire by David, military struggles to secure the land have the peculiar designation "holy war." Though our inferences are not so firm or complete as we might like, we can describe the holy war with some confidence."²

The holy war is linked to the process of God's liberation of his people from the bondage of slavery. The battles are not regulated according to practical and efficient military tactics, for they are seen—presumably by the beneficiaries and more certainly by the storyteller—as special interventions of God. Hence no standing army is necessary, nor is numerical superiority even desirable. Single combat or action by a few against the many is a more suitable vehicle for allowing God's decisive hand to be discerned. Holy war recitals stress the various means of consulting God: urim and thummin, ark, ephod. Typically the combatants abstain from food and sexual intercourse. God's intervention, whether coming through nature or more directly, results in the panicked rout of the foe and in the victory of God's people. The vanquished but surviving enemy is put "under the ban," utterly destroyed as though a contagious, dangerous presence.

One last point necessary for background and proper understanding of Saul, David and God concerns the institution of the monarchy. Prior to the choice of Saul there had been no king, interim problems being dealt with by temporary leaders. God was the king. The Philistine threat is described as a more enduring condition requiring, in the view of the Israelite elders, a more effective leadership. " . . . [A]ppoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations," they ask (I Sam. 8:5). Though scholars dispute the exact pitch of God's reaction to this request, an interpretation which recognizes the historical difficulties but also credits the poet with the art of telling the story with subtlety suggests that God is not essentially hostile to the idea itself.³ Though he recognizes in the peoples' request for a new king a rejection of himself as incumbent king and sees in it nothing more or less than disobedience typical of so much of Israel's relationship with God, he agrees to the plan, preceding his compliance only with a solemn warning to Israel of what her choice of monarchy will inevitably involve; royal rebelliousness will both seduce and oppress the people.

The storyteller stresses God's role in the choice of Saul: prophet anoints, signs attend, lot verifies, military success endorses Saul's accession to the throne. The king did not achieve his position against God's will. The people's basic mistake was not their request for a king. The prophet Samuel sums up God's viewpoint on the topic of the human king: you were wrong to ask, but what is done is done. Follow the Lord faithfully, let your king do the same, and the Lord will not forsake you. But should your king ensnare
you, disaster will overtake you and him. The traditional obligation holds: obedience to the law. The presence of a king is theoretically neutral, seems hopeful to the people, but looks dubious to the prophet. God’s eye is for obedience, however accomplished.

So it is Saul’s disobedience that angers God, disobedience serious enough to result in Saul’s rejection, and yet a disobedience of which he seems scarcely aware. Complacent in his victory (raising a monument to himself), Saul greets Samuel sunnily, reporting that he had completed his task satisfactorily. Is he nervous, bluffing, whistling in the dark? Is he cunning? bold? ignorant? stupid? Samuel’s ironic reference to mooing and baaing prompts in Saul a shift of reference pronoun from they to we: “‘They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and oxen, to sacrifice to the Lord your God, and the rest we have put under the ban’” (emphasis added). Not so, says Samuel. You, just the king, disobeyed the orders of the God who chose you and who told you to put all Amalekites, man and beast, under the ban. You profaned the ritual by swooping on the spoil, evil deed!

Saul, perhaps beginning to sense the problem, tries once again—desperation and sincerity pushing him to take fuller personal responsibility. “‘I have obeyed the voice of the Lord, I have gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me, I have brought Agag the king of the Amalekites, and I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things set aside for the ban to sacrifice to the Lord your God at Gilgal’” (I Sam. 15:20-21). Samuel then reminds him that obedience is a duty more basic than sacrifice, is better than sacrifice, and that disobedience is no better than idolatry. Samuel is not interested in the irrelevant details of who did what. The king is to help the people obey, not accede to their disobedience. Samuel’s words penetrate Saul’s defenses and he acknowledges his sin and accounts for it: he fears the people. Though Samuel and God have long since lost interest in the alibis, we can hear Saul out with patience and pity, as his next words attest to his insecurity even more clearly than his confession did. He asks forgiveness, and that request gaining from Samuel no response except the repetition of God’s rejection of Saul as king, Saul asks to save face with the people.

Saul’s rejection, though for a serious disobedience in a weighty sacral matter—and for obedience to man rather than to God—may seem unfair to us. Should not good intentions count for something? Does not ignorance lessen culpability? Might not God or his prophet have been more explicit sooner, more helpful if so fussy? And Saul seems to dangle pitifully, a witness to his own collapse, giving ground gradually before the strength of his successor. Uncomfortable for Saul and for God and for the new king and for the Israelites—and for us, the readers of the story.
But God is testing the mettle of a new man, and whether we are yet ready to abandon Saul's cause, whether we would delay God or Samuel or our poet, hoping for some happier reconciliation of claims, the storyteller moves us along to the next scenes. And as we follow the story of Saul and the new king David, there is sufficient ground for us to conclude that David has his flaws too and represents, in many ways, no substantial improvement over Saul. What gain? *Cui bono?* One of our clearest clues, though it is so small we probably scarcely notice it (I Sam. 13:14), is that the new king, presumably unlike the old, has a heart like God's own.\(^4\)

Far from helping us, that clue seems to make matters worse. For we recognize all the more undeniably that we are now facing in this story questions not only about the human condition but about God. God's character; human freedom and divine control of events; God's prior knowledge and judgment; God and violence; God and preferential treatment of one group of people to the clear detriment of other peoples; God and favoritism. Some heart.

*The Young David*

Who, then, is the replacement for Saul, the consolation prize winner, the second choice of God (yet better than Saul), the man with the heart like God's? Like Saul, David is physically impressive. As was the case with Saul, the storyteller shows us in numerous ways that David is king: he is selected by God, anointed by the prophet, proven in battle, acclaimed by the people. The accession of David to the throne is the story of I Sam. 16-II Sam. 5, and the leisurely recital of it leaves ample room for the flourishes and complexities of detail. What concerns us now is the character of the new king, his heart, and the insight his heart gives into God's. One of the stories of his introduction to Saul (I Sam. 17) provides us with a good opportunity to study David the youth, and while we are at it, to examine the skill of the storyteller. We can gain insight into the character of David and know how we gained it as we notice contrasts, pace and spacing of the story, and character shifts.

David, keeper of sheep, still obedient to his father's directives, arrives at the Israelite camp where Saul, who once followed the flocks of his father, now has responsibility for his people. Saul and Israel are threatened once again by the Philistines, and in fact each day for forty days they have been terrorized into immobility—in fact into retreat—by the vaunting of the Philistine hero Goliath. David's demeanor contrasts quite clearly with theirs. He arrives at the camp, deposits with the quartermaster supplies and gifts sent by the father to David's brothers, and goes to find his siblings. While David speaks with his brothers, Goliath bellows his challenge. The Israelite men first back off but then fall to discussing, a bit impractically, it
would seem at first, the reward promised by King Saul to the slayer of the giant Goliath. Though the sight and sound of the challenge are fresh for him, David displays no fear, only eager, interested attention. His ear is caught by the insult to God in the giant’s words—or some would say by the reward. Perhaps both. David’s inquiry into the pertinent circumstances occasions an outburst from his brother Eliab, who charges him with voyeurism, irresponsibility and ineffectiveness: “‘And with whom have you left those few sheep? . . . You have come down to see the battle!’” (I Sam. 17:28). The storyteller, having already assured us of David’s reliability and allowed us to hear the purpose of his presence in the camp, allows us to decide this gibe in David’s favor. We will hear David speak of his care for his flock later, too, and are now prepared to believe him if we weren’t before. Eliab also provides for us a brief but clear study of a frightened man, lashing out at another, singling out the trait he senses is most troubling in himself.

David’s ingenuous stance contrasts effectively with Goliath: heavily and hugely armored, his foreign name and gentileic testifying to the threat to the Israelite people. We hear Goliath described as David and the men see him, and while recognizing the seriousness of the “dense pack” defense, the clue to the soft spot is presented to us clearly. Goliath’s words heighten the impression of danger and the ignominy of the situation, as he insults Saul’s authority, taunts the Israelites with slavery, and impugns the power of God. Single combat is his suggestion, and it surely seems a safe proposal from his perspective.

And we must feel pity or compassion for Saul, unable to volunteer himself, impotent before the sneers against his God, unable to induce anyone else to volunteer even for an heroic death, let alone a successful encounter. Saul has offered gifts, rewards to be claimed only if the volunteer vanquishes the foe, of course. But even the hand of Saul’s daughter cannot lure an Israelite into battle. Until David hears Goliath, that is. David’s second speech, his enlistment with Saul, shows us something already different from the boy remarking on the giant’s taunt and stung by his own brother’s sneer. For David’s approach to Saul is a masterpiece of courtesy and restraint, sensitive continuously to the implications of the request. “‘Let no man’s heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight this Philistine’” (I Sam. 17:32).

He addresses Saul appropriately as lord and calls himself servant, all respectfully in the third person. He begs that no man be afraid: a volunteer is ready—a tactful way to take on a job properly Saul’s. When questioned, he supplies references from his own shepherd’s experience; no obvious competition to the king there. David has fought lions and bears with only his hands and the courage in his heart. And, concludes David, the God whose name and people are bearing the insult of the Philistine presence will be the one to provide the deliverance. It is a lesson in theology and in
holy warfare, coming innocently from David's lips but striking us with a sense of familiarity. And Saul accepts the lesson and the volunteer.

The arming of David is a significant moment in the story. In addition to linking David to heroes of other classical traditions whose bards invest them before battle, the dressing of David in Saul's armor stresses the contrast between characters. David finds the armor of the king too large for himself and removes it, giving us insight into the shrewdness of his judgment and introducing us to the dominant pattern by which the poet will describe David's accession to the throne: the young king will eventually step into the armor of the older king, win the hearts of soldiers and people, come between Saul and his relationships with his children, acquire the priest and the cultic apparatus. And each time, as in the present instance, Saul will have had a hand, ironically, in the replacement. "Then Saul clothed David with his armor" (I Sam. 17:38). The donning and doffing of metal armor also recalls for us the far superior armor of the Philistines and prepares us to be all the more amazed and intrigued when David chooses instead the five smooth stones. And the scene readies us to measure a change that will come over David shortly.

As the poet lets us linger over the approach of the boy to the giant, we hear David stress once again the religious significance of his labor and we recognize the holy war elements of this military encounter. And having spent forty-eight verses on the study of the boy David, our poet dispatches the battle itself as quickly as the boy does the giant: one slung stone, one verse to record it. With Goliath on the ground, stunned or dead, David finds himself with no weapon for the dénouement; and so, correctly for this type of heroic deed, he decapitates the defeated monster with its weapon. The story winds down quickly to panic, flight, and defeat of the Philistines—fruits of the holy war carefully conducted. We get a fleeting view of David putting Goliath's armor into his tent. Leaving aside the question of the tent (David being a commuter) and going beneath the absurdity of his ever thinking he would be able to wear it, we can see the storyteller showing us that the battle, begun with a slingshot but completed with a sword, has taught the already shrewd David a lesson about weapons. Having previously rejected man-sized, king-sized armor as excessive to his needs, he can now see the advantage of keeping the giant's armor for some later occasion: a small cloud on the horizon.

So as we follow this story about divine and human interaction, watching not only the feinting between God and David but the heart our poet says they share, we can feel somewhat confident in the early impressions. Saul's replacement, and presumably the God whom he resembles, seems bold, brave, stouthearted. He seems to eschew human approval for divine approbation, to break down stalemate and danger with craft and persuasion and a minimum of violence and force. The defensiveness we may have felt over
the treatment accorded Saul can subside. Perhaps God learned a lesson and has mended his ways.

Comparison with the Greek Epic

The *Odyssey*, too, reflects the perception that human beings live their lives somewhat at the pleasure (and displeasure) of the gods; and like David's poet, Homer offers us insight as we study Odysseus. At this point, where the epics are so obviously close—perhaps even cognate—and where we can parallel the heroes and their deeds rather simply, let us shift to the *Odyssey* and the encounter between Odysseus and Polyphemos (Od. 9. 173-594) so that we can appreciate the common themes, motifs, characterizations and questions; so that we can consider further the question of the relationship between divine and human as drawn by another artist; and so that we can begin to work out some distinctions between the world views of the Hebrew and Greek cultures.

It is easy enough to recognize the folklore and literary motifs that the two episodes share: little man vs. giant; wit vs. brute strength; invulnerability of the giant except for one soft spot which the hero locates and exploits; vaunting of the giant, insulted by the seemingly inconsequential appearance of the hero; taunts and scorning of the hero's gods; arming scene; weapon of the vanquished used against him by the victor; stress on the identity of the hero.

David and Odysseus share heroic characteristics. Each is curious, brave—even brash—a clear contrast to his companions. When the companions urge caution the hero pushes ahead, whether wisely or foolishly, rightly or wrongly. Each, however, is also characterized as able to act carefully, subtly, courteously, stealthily when that is appropriate. The heroes of these epics see more than others do, or they see the same reality but understand it more deeply. In these episodes each hero sees a solution—perhaps the obvious one: killing Goliath with the aid of Saul's armor, killing Polyphemos with Odysseus' sword—but then realizes the solution would in fact be a trap. Then each recognizes that what he really needs to accomplish his purposes effectively is lying at hand, in plain view, a low-tech solution to a seemingly high-tech problem: five smooth stones and a boy's slingshot, a wooden beam and the fire in the Kyklops' hearth. Each hero, then, is clever, almost too clever for his own good. The successful quests in these episodes seed troubles that each hero will have to struggle with, but the struggles themselves breed experience and wisdom, so the heroes grow. Each hero is protected, helped or sustained by his deity.

Common themes structure the sagas of David and Odysseus: quest for the homeland (Saul and David to secure it, Odysseus to reclaim it); struggle to end chaos that threatens to engulf the hero's culture; hospitality and the
evil resulting from its abuse; power shifts as an old order crumbles and a new emerges.

What questions can the common features of these materials offer for our consideration? Which of these can best further our insight into the questions raised in this essay? I would recommend four lines of thought.

First, do these Greek and Hebrew stories suggest significant shifts in culture, away from tribal autonomy, from the Kyklopes' isolation, from individual heroic deeds toward a common venture, toward cooperation, toward the pooling of resources and goals which result in greater likelihood of success but perhaps less satisfaction for most participants? The Israelites are about to establish a monarchy that will make possible some achievements but bring in its train some great injustices. Odyseus' task is really just beginning as the Odyssey ends, for having reclaimed his heritage he must now administer it effectively. If such shifts are being discussed, these two heroic deeds are the last of their sort and become in some ways irrelevant to the new culture patterns opening up. Change perhaps regrettable, but certainly inevitable.

Second, do the stories suggest the dangers of lawlessness: what happens when sacrosanct tenets, most notably hospitality, are abused? I will develop this point further in the essay.

Third, what about the use of violence or force? Do these heroes triumph mostly because they use their wits? Is there a message here that heroes, these and others, cannot expect to counter force with force and succeed? Or is it a matter of using wit in service of violence? It may be irrelevant that death came through a slingshot and blindness through a stick; dead and blind is dead and blind. Each hero triumphs, but the temporary reduction in the scale of violence is not significant. Violence is not containable.

Fourth, how is divine and human interaction described? Each story is built around a weave of strife and cooperation between the gods and human beings. Each is set remotely against a background of table fellowship violated. The human beings have misbehaved at the banquet of the deity. Whatever the relationship might have been, discord now characterizes it. And the divine and human continue to interact, sometimes helping and sometimes seeming to thwart each other.

But the differences in the characterization of the divine make the hero's task—the human endeavor—vastly different. The Greek gods quarrel not only with human beings but among themselves. The god's interactions shift the fate of the humans repeatedly if whimsically. The most the Greek heroes can hope for is to placate the gods, secure some effective support, stay out of the way of the ricochet. The Greeks do not seem to love their gods for the qualities they possess, nor do they seek to emulate them or to be challenged by their virtues.
The Hebrew story reflects a different pattern. The sovereignty of the deity Yahweh eliminates divine squabbling as a factor in the human condition. Other gods do not exist, though some think they do, and so it is the danger of the illusion that the Hebrews must avoid. With only one God, then, and that one fairly consistent (at least by comparison with other deities), it is not almost hopeless for the hero (and other human beings) to think of staying aligned with divine purposes. The wide sweep of the arbitrary is at least reduced. The enmity between man and God is not inevitable or desirable or willed by God or stirred up afresh on that side of the relationship. The deity is not jealous of the human condition but wills that the humans "stay in line," stay aligned for their own good, not because God stands to lose otherwise or feels threatened. Shalom, well being, is the common goal, the genuine goal of all creatures who have taken life from the creator. The goal of the human quest is for the human heart to love and be shaped by the love of God, to be the like of God's heart. Wisdom is the recognition of the unity of creator and all of creation. Such, at least, is the frame with which the book of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomist editor surrounds our story of Saul and David. Whatever questions arise for us about God's treatment of Saul and David's resemblance to God need to be worked at, initially or minimally at least, within the constraints imposed by that viewpoint. Let us resume that particular task.

Violations of Hospitality

Though we left David at the beginning of his quest for the throne and cannot detail the stages of that journey, we can understand something of it and of the hero's quest as we examine this epic at another of its most famous and crucial spots: II Samuel 10-12. Again without the luxury of seeing the patterns in detail, we understand that the storyteller has drawn David's accession with three main lines: two very clear and the third studiedly and richly multivalent. The clear lines: David, anointed king even before the Goliath episode, also became king as he took over Saul's kingly roles (effective leader of the militia, focus of communication with God) and as he usurped Saul's position of pre-eminence in the hearts of those who served him (fighting men, son and daughter, priests and prophet, people). As noted before, Saul himself was often, whether consciously or unconsciously, a participant and helper in the transfer of power. A second very clear line that runs throughout the story is David's absolute respect for the inviolability of the life of Saul, the Lord's anointed. Even when Saul deserves it least, David is scrupulous in his efforts to keep from harming Saul, to insist on his own innocence and his right to be and seem vindicated in the face of Saul's pursuit of him, to remove himself conspicuously from any situation in which the king might be harmed.
The third pathway along which the poet pushes the story is far more equivocally told and hence open to a plethora of interpretations. That pathway involves David, violence and deceit. As early as I Samuel 18 we can begin to wonder if David is truthful, and by chapter 21 we see the first unambiguous stain on David's character: he lied to the priest and the result was the massacre of almost an entire priestly line. He barely avoided violence against Nabal and was saved from it only through the skill of Nabal's wife Abigail (I Sam. 25). The deaths of Saul and Jonathan did not give David an automatic claim to the throne, since the Saulide Ishbosheth (Ishbaal) was helped up to it by Saul's commander Abner. But David's men ignominiously killed both Abner and then Ishbosheth, and though David was loudly indignant, even outraged, we have been given the latitude to wonder about his own role and his own response (II Sam. 1-6). But David finally became king over Israel and Judah.

It is the third pathway, on which violence and treachery lurk, that becomes most prominent in the latter part of the David story, the story about David the king. And this pathway leads us again to the topic of hearts.

As II Samuel opens, war provides the backdrop as before. However, this does not seem to be the holy war but the more secular arrangement of international affairs, an alliance between David's kingdom and that of Nahash the Ammonite that sours when Nahash dies and his son rejects David's condolences. The tangle of alliances pulls several peoples into the war but the return of the season of war finds a stalemate between Ammon and Israel and Israelite soldiers in siege before Rabbah of Ammon.

In our search to understand God's chosen king and so learn something of the heart of God, we are as usual at the mercy of our storyteller. And though the siege of Rabbah may not seem much different to us than did the Philistine war, it seems that the poet perceives a difference and wishes us to see it too. David has reacted not to an insult to his God but to an affront to his own dignity and authority. The war that ensues is not fought to preserve for Israel God's gift of land; it is not a war led by God where his might shows forth best in the paltriness of his people but a protracted siege of the city of another people. And when comes the springtime at which kings fight wars, David sends Joab; and so begins the episode toward which the whole saga has been building and from which will unfold the rest of the story of David's life and reign.

The story is told soberly in II Samuel 11, without melodramatic effects. While Joab and the fighting men and the ark are at war and David remains in Jerusalem, he sees a woman, confirms her identity as Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, sends for her, sleeps with her. When she conceives their child and David can foresee exposure of his deed, he contrives to involve Uriah in a cover-up. He summons the warrior from the war, tries to persuade him to go to his house and sleep with his wife; Uriah, Hittite
though he be, is more respectful of his own obligations and the good conduct of the war than to agree to such a suggestion; even when David makes him drunk, Uriah does not forsake his piety. David conspires again, with Uriah as unwitting partner, and this time David succeeds. Trusting the honorable message bearer will not interfere with the message, he sends in the hand of the victim instructions to Joab to effect Uriah's death. David instructs Joab to divert the process of the war in order to deprive the army of this one valiant warrior, to deprive the king of one of his mighty men (a very special relationship that seems to have stretched back to the days when David was fleeing Saul), and to deprive a woman of her husband. And then David tops off the deed with sanctimonious words of assuagement. David is guilty of dereliction of duty, adultery, breach of a sacred tie, disloyalty to the war effort, lies, insults, murder, cover-up. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this set of deeds is far more reprehensible than Saul's weakness in sparing Agag and a few animals for sacrifice to God! The resemblance between David's heart and God's does not seem much of a commendation for the deity. And God's reaction? In one of the few places where God comes into the stories of David's kingship we hear from the storyteller that "the thing that David had done displeased the Lord" (II Sam. 11:27). And so it might.

As with Saul, a prophet comes to notify David of consequences. And like Saul, David blusters a bit. But like Saul, he knows when he is convicted and admits his guilt. But here similarities between kings shift. For where Saul lost the kingship as a result of his disobedience, David's punishment, the consequence of "the thing" he did, is the death of the child conceived so dishonorably. And so it happens. Once announced, the word moves toward fulfillment. The child sickens; David intercedes for it with fasting and prayer; the child dies. We are confronted with something new to the story: the innocent suffering in place of the guilty. Whatever Saul's guilt was, it was between God and himself. So surely is David's but the hand of God strikes not man but child.

This episode in David's life, his singularly gross breach of his own royal duties, of his sacred bond with a compatriot, and his confrontation with death give us another opportunity to look at the *Odyssey* with its heavy stress on the crime against Agamemnon, the obligations of hospitality, and Odysseus' confrontations with his mortality.

The *Odyssey* is obsessed with the question of hospitality, familial relationships, and the results of violations of them. The main storyline involves the return of Odysseus to his home, his reunion with the faithful Penelope, the requital of the outrageous behavior of her suitors in her husband's home. The story is set against a larger backdrop of the violation of the hearth of Menelaos and the faithlessness of his wife Helen. And threaded through the *Odyssey* is reference to the return of Agamemnon to his home
and wife and the particular violations of hospitality he suffered (Od. 1. 49-59; 3. 205-93; 4. 80-542; 11. 425-513; 13. 447; 24. 100-03, 211-14). Both the Hebraic and Greek sagas stress the immorality of such violations, an immorality both personal and social. Like the Hebrew hero, every Greek who transgresses the code shows himself unworthy, reprehensible. Each will suffer consequences of his acts. But breaches of hospitality also threaten the social fabric. The whole story of David's kingship (almost the only part of it we are told) unravels from the murder of his companion and his adultery with that man's wife. The Homeric epics show an order radically rent when Menelaos' wife is taken; they show the evil continuing as Agamemnon's avenging son is pursued by furies; they show Odysseus' labors on Ithaka as formally equivalent to his various battles with chaos monsters before he arrives home; and they link his adventures with and departures from females to his quest for his own hearth. The Odyssey offers us contrasting models in Klytemnestra and Penelope and helps us ask to which of them we can liken Bathsheba. The deities respond to the dangers of hospitality violation. The characters of Orestes and Telemakhos help us assess David's sons Amnon, Absalom, Adonijah and Solomon and feel for their father as we do so.

Odysseus' confrontations with his mortality are perhaps a bit more flamboyant than are David's, but we can trace the same human journey in both stories. Though Odysseus confirms his mortality when he finally rejects Kalypso's proffered gift of agelessness (Od. 7. 257-787), his journey to the underworld forces him to consider the destiny of a hero. He begins to learn there how he is to get home. He looks on familiar souls with new eyes, learns there about his father, mother, wife and son and begins to think of them in a new way. His romantic but ignorant rhapsody about death is cut short by his friend Akhilleus, who suggests Odysseus has still more to learn about life and death. Odysseus' very success in entering and leaving the underworld, his ability to confront death and grow in wisdom, wins from Athena the praise "hearts of oak" for himself and his companions (Od. 12. 22).

Odysseus confronts his human limitations even when he sleeps, for it is then that his men release the winds from their bag (Od. 10. 37-53) and slaughter the cattle of Helios (Od. 12. 396-432). It is, in a sense, Odysseus' weak human fabric as well as his companions' foolishness that brings about their demise and his further troubles. Odysseus' reclaiming of his place in Ithaka—his places as lord, son, husband, father, host—rebinds him to his fate as mortal man rather than as slayer of and victor over superhuman forces.

The shadow in David's character that has been deepening since the death of the priests and the assassination of the Saulides has now fallen on David's own child and brings the father, too, face to face with the mystery
and sorrow of death. It is common to read that the early Hebrews had no concept of an afterlife, and it is surely true that materials earlier than the second century B.C. give few hints of it. Influenced undoubtedly by contact with other world views, Jewish thought on the afterlife eventually develops along two distinct lines: resurrection of the body and immortality of the soul. In the passage at hand, David is consoled by neither of these beliefs. He intercedes for the sick child but ceases his plea to God once it dies. Questioned by his servants because they find his behavior to be such a reversal of the usual mourning customs, David observes that death is final. Any reunion between himself and the child will be a result of David’s own death rather than the child’s return. And he does suggest he will join the child, recalling a lament where Job speaks of the realm of the dead as quiet and untroubled and where kings are at rest next to children (Job 3:13-19). The death of the child reminds David of his own death.

The child’s death is also linked clearly to another aspect of David’s mortality: his condition as a sinful human being. Bathsheba and David’s child is to die because its parents sinned, the prophet Nathan proclaims. We seem far removed from the shepherd boy rising to the defense of an insult to God, from the young man pursued by the jealousy of Saul and yet so protective of Saul’s life and so eager for a reconciliation. David’s fasting and prayer to God for the life of his small son are also an intercession to God for his own life, a recognition that caught up in the life of the child are David’s own crimes against Uriah, against the war, against his people, against his kingship, against God. David’s plea for his child is part of his cry of repentance.

There is a third way in which David confronts his own mortality in this episode, in which he faces the consequences of his limitations. It is clear that whatever other nascent beliefs in the continuity of personal existence there may have been, the dominant Hebrew way to live on is through descendants. A man’s name lived when he had sons to carry it, when his children spoke their father’s name over his heritage. And here David sees that possibility reduced as his child predeceases him. And linked in Nathan’s message with the death of the baby was the promise that David’s own house would turn against him. And the rest of the epic of King David details the defection and diminishment of his own sons: some drop out of the story silently;⁶ Amnon will be murdered by his brother Absalom for his crime against their sister. Absalom will be killed by Joab while trying to tear the kingdom from his father David. Adonijah, too, will twice usurp and be killed as a result of it. David’s power, fertility, his self-possession and control of events will seem to dwindle to very little. The tremendous blindness, weakness and fallibility that led David to gratify his desire with Bathsheba will dog his relationships in his private and public life from now on.
But after the death of his child, David has more to learn about his humanity. "Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba and went into her and lay with her; and she bore a son, and he called his name Solomon. And the Lord loved him . . . " (II Sam. 12:25). Having faced his own darkness, David receives forgiveness, a new child, an heir for his throne. And the Lord loved him.

What can we see of God's heart in the latter part of the story? We see that David, so beloved by all the people, so powerful as a young king, has a correspondingly great potential for evil. He sins titanically. And accepting his guilt without excuse, hearing his own sin proclaimed in the prophet's parable, David beseeches God for forgiveness, begs for his own life and his son's. With one petition granted and the other refused, David accepts God's answer to him, rises from the ground, consoles Bathsheba and begets another son. God is reflected in David's character: shepherd boy taking on the giant; young warrior beloved of his people; friend to Jonathan; husband of Michal. God's purpose can be seen in even the single-mindedness of David, who will stop at nothing to acquire the throne—nothing except turning his hand against King Saul. Even David's actions that so displeased God offer us insight into God's restraint, his justice and finally his compassion. David's actions are bold, imaginative, vital. David's God is spacious, generous, honest, loving, resilient, patient and gentle. In this David resembles God; David takes his measure from God, finds himself wanting, and God refashions the king's heart and recreates his spirit. David's illusions of omnipotence crumble as he sees his own weakness, and God raises him from the ground and instructs his heart. David's blindness remains in part, his Achilles' heel is not transformed; but his arrogance and intransigence are banked, at least until the end of his life. David's final years are a study not in non-violence but in one of its opposites: passivity. David's excessive power exercised so badly against Bathsheba and Uriah seems to have left him unable to counter in an appropriate way the excesses of his sons. This weakness pervades both private and public sectors, of course, since David is king and his sons each wished to be so too. The old violence, accompanied again by deceit, bursts forth once more from the deathbed of the apparently senile and impotent king. David seems not to have learned that part of his lesson well. But perhaps by now the instruction is for us, as David is about to rejoin his fathers (and sons). The violence unleashed as David passes on the throne to Solomon, continuing even when David is dead, provides only temporary security for his heirs as it achieves little that was satisfactory for him. The seeds of the critique of violence are in the tradition, in the call for love of God and of neighbor and in the plea for respect for all life, but it is not in the David stories that these seeds develop, except perhaps negatively.
What, then, do the poets offer us by way of insight into ourselves, our humanity, our relationship with reality larger than ourselves? What have these archaic stories to do with us? How do they presume to instruct us?

The poets are like ourselves except that they see more clearly, know more deeply, speak more compellingly. They draw their characters from the "great soup" of tradition, from their own experience, with their own artistry. Though the poets are not on the ancient scenes with video cameras, neither are their gods and humans mere puppets, projections. Each poet is concerned to show the range of our humanity, to illustrate for us the limits of what we can do, know, feel, hope for. The deity is part of what we must meet in order to learn about ourselves. God—the gods—can be seen as that which lies beyond our limits, as extra help for us, as a surge of power (should we be so fortunate), as divine arrangement or presence which offers us dilemmas, choices, opportunities for failure or success. The divine beings in these stories are shaped as characters, not human but built on that analogue, though with access to more than humans can achieve unless the gods assist. They help the humans exceed their own reach; they shape us to be our best selves. Or, as Zeus comments, does it seem that the gods set us up, expose our frailties, cause us to blunder from disaster to disaster? Athena helps Odysseus but no one assists Agamemnon. God forgives David a far greater sin than that for which he rejects Saul. We are not far in our journey toward humanization, have not reflected very deeply if such thoughts have not crossed our minds.

So we are back to the poets again and to their deep purposes. Homer, like other bards, invokes the Muses as he begins his story of Odysseus. Homer was not a witness to the story of Odysseus and Athena, nor was the poet of David's court privy to all of the scenes he describes. The poets draw on the Muses, on the wisdom or spirit of God, for information and insight; for humans cannot know, unaided, the essence of the stories they tell. Aided by forces beyond themselves, the poets retell their own and our experience with images both clear and mysterious to us.

They tell the story of our youth, our dreams, our eager aspirations. They describe our successes and then they show our limits, our disappointments, our being thwarted by others like ourselves, or perhaps by those who seem quite alien. The poets celebrate and lament our limits, celebrate that we aspire for more than we can achieve, try but fail, sin but repent, and learn and so grow in insight, wisdom and compassion. The poets sing of our discovery that there is more in this world than our discernibly limited selves, that we can find companionship with other human beings, can choose their good over our own, upon occasion, or see others' and our weal as common. These are forces beyond our ability to understand: the workings of nature, the seemingly random effects of choice, forces of good, forces of evil. The poets reflect our experience that life is not fair by obvious
measure: abilities and disabilities are apportioned unevenly; the good and young die out of season while the old and weary linger. The poets draw the gods to human scale—large but still to scale—and we are dissatisfied with their justice as we are with our own. We see our flaws in them: the gods have mortal heels. We feel they are alien to our world, even competitive with us for a few prizes: the good life, fame, success. We feel the gods are locked in strife with us, but perhaps that motif in our stories reflects our radical discontinuity with the rhythm and pulse of the universe, our unwillingness—inability—to align ourselves with the life that is around us.

The poets speak of intervention, too. The gods help out in ways obvious and dramatic, subtle and undetected. Which of us can say where our own conscious efforts stop and something more profound moves in? All the stories of the favoritism of the gods, of luck and choice and fortuity speak to our recognition of our limits. The providence of God is a metaphor for a relationship in which we recognize ourselves as frequent—continual—recipients. And, in both the Greek and the Judeo-Christian stories, divine providence is not limited to the gifts we evaluate as positive. The gods teach us about themselves and about ourselves in many ways, perhaps most profoundly in suffering. David and Odysseus may learn more about humanity when they confront its end than when they meet its zenith.

So the poets draw us into their own reflection on life and death, on mortality and immortality. Their song is, at first hearing, pleasing, inviting, whimsical, imaginative. Only as we listen more intently do we hear our own lines. And so the poets lead us to consider our existence—not to resolve it, because our rational minds cannot unravel the knot we are presented with, nor can that part of our consciousness coded to myths wear it down to loose threads. We enter the mystery ever more deeply as we grow wiser, recognizing gratefully that untangling the skein is not the goal of the quest. Our poets bring us close to deep contact with our humanity and with divinity, and we are better off for the encounter. Do the poets speak well and truly of us and of God? That has been answered affirmatively by the human community which turns and returns to these epics, each some three thousand years old. Each of us is invited to immerse ourself in the depths of these works, take our measure against what we find, turn and return again. If this is not the moment, wait patiently. The song will not cease, the Muses and the Spirit will not tire, the depth of the insight, the truth of the mirror will not wear out while you wait. To enter is a gift of the gods—perhaps the most vital that they give.
Notes


4 H. W. Wolff, Anthropology of the Old Testament, trans. M. Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), pp. 40-58, characterizes “heart” as the most important word in the vocabulary of Old Testament anthropology. It refers to the physiological center of the body. It is the organ most susceptible to fear, illness, exhaustion; it is also the organ of thought, where vital decisions are made. It is the place of unknowable impulses. The thesis of this paper, that David’s heart is “like” God’s, hangs on a single letter, a preposition. The “like” can mean that David obeys God’s wishes; that is the usual translation. But the primary meaning of the preposition is “the like of.” David’s heart resembles God’s heart.

5 The question of Bathsheba’s responsibility is a difficult though important and intriguing one. The storyteller does not comment directly on it, nor does any other character seem to speak for him. A careful reading of the episode provides a hint about the storyteller’s opinion (which we need not agree with but which we should wish to detect). Surrounding the story of Bathsheba’s relations with David are stories of Abigail (I Sam. 25) and Tamar (II Sam. 13). Each woman spoke and acted decisively when threatened. Abigail’s initiative even in the face of David’s initial disapproval helped him avoid bloodshed. And David’s daughter Tamar, in a scene dependent in several ways on the David-Bathsheba encounter, speaks up to dissuade her attacker, to stress the folly being committed and the ignominy that will attach to both of them. By contrast, Bathsheba’s silence would seem to give consent. The laws of Deut. 22:23-27 may also be presumed as background to the story, with David’s royal rank not excusing Bathsheba from the law.