Alex Israel

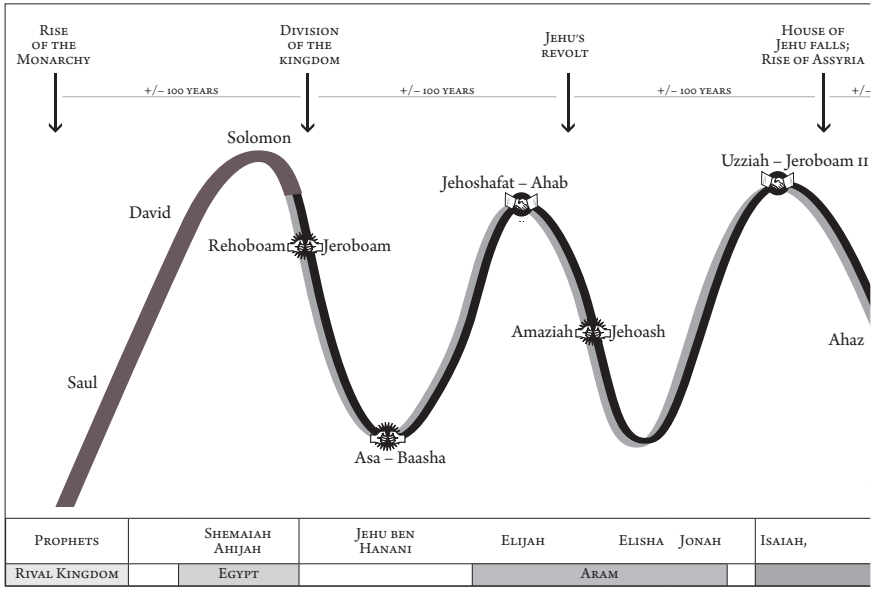
I Kings
Torn in Two

מלכים א׳

Maggid Books
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Contents

The Era of the Kings: A Graphic Summary

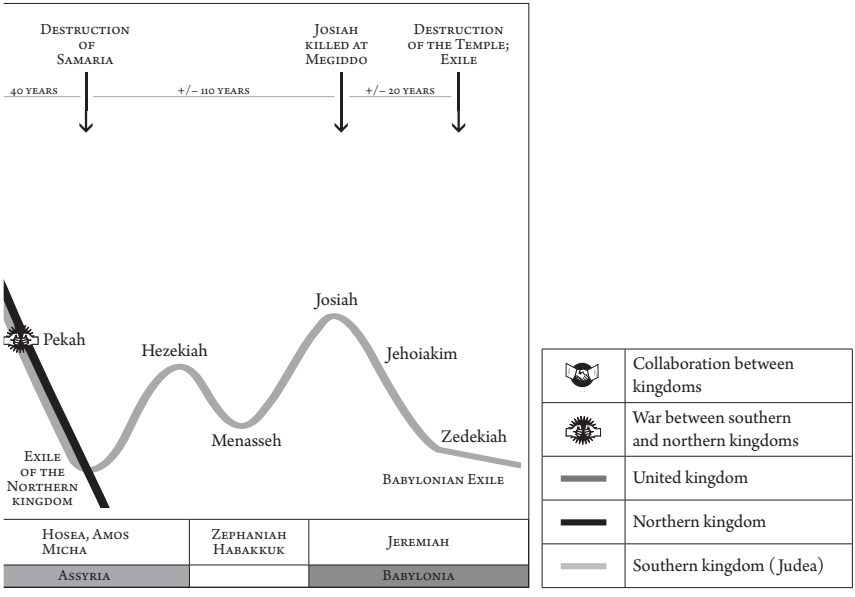


Based on the Hebrew chart in the booklet, I Kings: Worksheets for the Student and Teacher (Alon Shevut: Herzog College, 2008), with special thanks to Herzog College for permission to use it.

The book of Kings spans over four hundred years of history and it is easy to get lost in the details. This visual representation offers a perspective on the wider historical context.

The chart records the basic historical units of the book, the highs and lows of the kingdom, the kings who engaged in civil war and those who collaborated with each other, the prophets for each period, and the rival powers with which Israel contended. Let us address a few central observations.

Israel experiences a high point – economic prosperity and a state of peace – when neighboring powers are at their low point. As rival states gain power, Israel finds it harder to flourish. Hence, David and Solomon's dominance of the region ends as Egypt flexes it muscles with King Shishak's invasion. Likewise, the lull between the fall of Aram and the rise of Assyria allows the heyday experienced by Uzziah in Judah and by Jeroboam in the north. Similarly, as the Assyrian empire wanes and before the Babylonian Empire has



reached its peak, Josiah manages to lead the kingdom to an era of relative prosperity. An exception to this is the period of Ahab and Jehoshaphat, in which the kingdom flourishes despite the power of Aram. Israel's internal strength and Ahab's alliance with Phoenicia allow Israel to defeat Aram and to dominate other kingdoms, such as Moab and Edom.

Interestingly, prophets often appear during the best of times: Ahijah the Shilonite at the end of Solomon's reign, Elijah during the period of Ahab, Isaiah and Amos during the heyday of Uzziah and Jeroboam II. It would seem that the prophets come to warn the people that the good times are the result of geopolitical factors, rather than God's satisfaction with the national culture. Frequently, prophets come to warn that hard times are approaching, or to caution against alliances with superpowers that will exact a steep cultural and moral price. Conversely, in hard times, prophets tend to offer solace and hope for the future, along with a call to return to God as a key to a better future.

Places mentioned in 1 Kings

1 Kings 1

Race to the Throne

The book of Kings opens with a dramatic chapter of political intrigue and rivalry. King David is frail and elderly, but he has given no public instructions as to a designated heir.[1] Two sons of David contend for the throne: the dashing Adonijah, the hereditary heir, and his younger brother, Solomon. It is Adonijah who makes the first move, instigating his own celebratory coronation at Enrogel, just outside the walls of Jerusalem. He is supported by Joab, the army chief, and by his royal siblings. In response, Solomon's supporters – Nathan the prophet and Bathsheba, King David's wife and Solomon's mother – mobilize quickly to thwart Adonijah's coronation. In a carefully choreographed series of political machinations, they approach the ailing King David and insist that he honor an earlier promise to have Solomon crowned. The king accedes to their request, and Solomon is led to the Gihon spring in a royal procession and anointed as the monarch. Celebration erupts in the capital, surprising Adonijah's rival gathering and throwing his faction

1. This chapter is the *haftara* for *parashat Hayyei Sara* as both episodes depict the succession from an aging father to his son. In this regard, Abraham and Isaac connect with David and Solomon.

into disarray and panic. The chapter ends with Adonijah fearful for his life, and he seeks sanctuary at the sacrificial altar in Jerusalem. Solomon agrees to spare Adonijah as long as he pledges fealty to the new king.[2]

THE PROBLEM OF ABISHAG

The problem presented at the outset of the chapter is the inability of the aged and ailing King David to get warm. The resolution is found in the appointment of Abishag as a "*sokhenet*," translated as a "companion." Abishag's role is to warm the king by sharing his bed.

This opening story is quite perplexing. Is this the simplest way to meet David's medical needs? Moreover, why are the precise details regarding Abishag relevant to the story? Furthermore, why was a search made of the entire country in order to find this young lady? The dignity of a king certainly demands a beautiful woman to serve his needs,

2. There is a great deal of discussion regarding the placement of these two opening chapters of the book of Kings. In general, the biography of King David is narrated in the book of Samuel. Why do two chapters describing David's old age appear in the book of Kings? Phrased differently, are chapters 1–2 a story about David, or do they, in fact, mark the beginning of the Solomon story, starting with his coronation and rise to power?

   Some academic scholars have suggested that chapters 1–2 of 1 Kings are in a sense a footnote to the book of Samuel. They mark the end of David's life and resolve the fate of several key figures who appear in 11 Samuel (Joab, Barzillai the Gileadite, and Shimei son of Gera; see ch. 2, "Generating Stability"). Moreover, chapter 1 continues a prominent theme of Samuel – children seizing power and brotherly rivalry in the royal family.

   On the other hand, there are good reasons to read chapters 1–2 as an independent story. First, Samuel already has an appendix of sorts in the form of chapters 21–24, an organic literary unit that ends the book. Two concluding "appendices" would be surprising. Moreover, the key elements of chapter 1 are noticeably absent from Samuel. There, Solomon is not a leading candidate for the throne, and the oath to Bathsheba is never recorded. Accordingly, these chapters form not a conclusion to Samuel, but rather an introduction to Kings.

   This influences our thinking about the question with which we began: Is this a story about David or Solomon? Once we assert that these opening chapters do not close Samuel, but introduce Kings by narrating the ascent of the new king to the throne, we must evaluate the opening episode from the perspective of Solomon's biography rather than David's. The key question, then, is how these events affect our understanding of Solomon, his persona, and his reign.

but might not a suitable candidate have been found in a more limited locale – the province of Judah, for instance?[3]

We shall offer two approaches to resolving these questions, which offer alternate dimensions of understanding the chapter.

APPROACH 1: A POLITICAL CHAPTER

The opening paragraph regarding Abishag may be perceived as setting a political tone to the chapter. In the opening verses, an anonymous group of courtiers are mentioned: "And his servants said, 'Let a virgin girl be sought for the king'" (1:2). Who are these unnamed "servants" or palace officials who instigate this national beauty contest? A key to identifying them is their reappearance in verse 9, when "all the men of Judah, the king's servants," join Adonijah in his coronation party. It appears that these palace officials, these "servants," are in fact aligned with Adonijah.

The proposal for a public, nationwide search for a woman to warm the sick King David's bed emerging from the headquarters of the Adonijah faction suggests that it is initiated as a publicity technique, a strategy in the campaign to crown Adonijah as king. The first stage of the campaign is to send a message to the entire country that the king is sick. This national beauty contest announces loud and clear that David cannot maintain his body temperature. The message is simple – the king is dying. Naturally, the nation will become quite concerned when the monarch's death appears imminent and a suitable heir has not yet been designated.[4]

Adonijah's supporters achieve their goal surreptitiously in order to obscure their motives and avoid accusations that they are usurping the throne. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Abishag story is directly related to Adonijah's self-election. With the heightened anxiety and urgency prevailing in Jerusalem, one imagines that all the talk is about

3. This story mirrors the search for a wife for Ahasuerus in the book of Esther. The similarity of the storyline is corroborated by some parallel language: The phrases "the king's servants" and "let them seek" (*yevakeshu*) appear both in 1 Kings 1 and in Esther 2:2. Ahasuerus, however, is a lecherous king who invites a new virgin into his bed each night for over a year. King David is the very antithesis, as we read, "… and the king did not know her" (1 Kings 1:4).

4. I heard this approach from my teacher, Rabbi Menachem Leibtag.

the pressing need to appoint a successor before the king dies. The stage is open for David's son to assume power.

Adonijah and His Coalition

> Now Adonijah son of Haggith went about boasting (*mitnasei*), "I will be king!" He provided himself with chariots and horses, and an escort of fifty runners. His father never scolded him, "Why did you do that?" He was the one born after Absalom and, like him, was very handsome. (1:5–6)

In treating this as a political story, we observe that the text here introduces Adonijah in the most pejorative terms. The phrase "*mitnasei*," translated here as "went about boasting," indicates a certain presumptuousness, as well as excessive pride. Even more significant is the way that the text compares Adonijah both explicitly and by allusion to his elder brother, the renegade Absalom.

Absalom ranks as one of the most infamous figures in the Bible. He murdered his brother Amnon in a calculated act of family vengeance;[5] worse still, he sought to depose his father, David, and kill him.[6] He is the rebellious son who, in a bid to demonstrate that he had assumed his father's place, pitched a tent on the palace roof and slept with David's concubines.[7]

There are several points of comparison between Adonijah and Absalom:

1. They are both described by their impressive good looks (1 Kings 1:5 and 11 Sam. 14:25).
2. Most significantly, they both instigate an attempt to crown themselves as king during their father's lifetime.
3. Each is the heir to the throne at the time of his self-coronation.[8]

5. 11 Samuel 13.
6. Ibid. 15–19.
7. Ibid. 16:22.
8. See the line of succession in 11 Samuel 3:2–4: "Sons were born to David in Hebron:

4. Adonijah uses David's ailments and the search for Abishag to discredit the king's health and to make him seem infirm. In a similar manner, Absalom paves the way to his self-coronation and raises public support by discrediting David's sense of justice (II Sam. 15:2–6).
5. Both Absalom and Adonijah make for themselves "chariots and horses and an escort of fifty runners" (I Kings 1:5 and II Sam. 15:1). Rashi views this practice as the result of foreign influence, alien to the Jewish ethic of the king.[9]
6. Absalom's sleeping with his father's ten concubines (II Sam. 16:20–22) parallels Adonijah's eventual request to marry Abishag (I Kings 2:13–22).

In equating Absalom and Adonijah, our chapter is directing us to a similarly unfavorable assessment of Adonijah.

Adonijah begins with a distinct advantage. His coalition is made up of David's oldest and most loyal associates: Joab, the army chief; the royal family; Abiathar, a veteran priest; and David's close advisers (*avdei hamelekh*). There is no intention of a rebellion, merely a deep concern for the stability of the kingdom. In a situation in which David appears to be dying, this well-connected group seeks to promote the hereditary heir, Adonijah, as a man who projects a strong leadership image, thereby ensuring national stability.

His firstborn was Amnon, to Ahinoam of Jezreel. His second, Chileab, to Abigail…; the third was Absalom son of Maacah.… The fourth, Adonijah son of Haggith…." See also ibid. 5:13–15. At the start of the book of Kings, Amnon and Absalom are both dead. We know little about Chileab, whose identity is something of an enigma; in I Chronicles 3:1–2, he is known by the name Daniel. We have no biographical information about Chileab/Daniel, and he never appears as a candidate for the monarchy, although the Talmud (*Berakhot* 4a) describes him as a Torah scholar.

9. I Samuel 8:12 suggests that the king's rights are to have soldiers running before his chariot; however, these two personalities provide the only instances in which we see so large a number of heralds. The negative dimension here would appear to be the large number of runners. In II Kings 1:9, 11, we see that fifty soldiers constitute an entire platoon. Even for Adonijah and Absalom, the crown prince, this would appear excessive. See also 18:41, in which it appears that only Elijah is running ahead of Ahab's chariot.

At a disadvantage are the group that is "uninvited" to Adonijah's coronation: "Nathan the prophet, Benaiah and the warriors, and his brother Solomon" (1:10). From the fact that these key figures are significantly omitted from the guest list, we may surmise that there has already been some contention as to the appropriate successor to David. This explains why Adonijah wishes to expedite his coronation – the stakes are high. There is further awareness that if Adonijah is crowned, Solomon's life is in peril (1:12).

Yet, if we line up the various coalitions, we can see that there is something missing in Adonijah's group (1:7–9):

	Adonijah	**Solomon**
Army	Joab	Benaiah
Priest	Abiathar	Zadok
Coalition	Royal family and servants of the king	Bathsheba, Shimei and Rei, and the warriors of David
Prophet	–	Nathan

The glaring omission of a prophet from Adonijah's team informs us that he is not concerned about receiving the messages of God – or, alternatively, that no prophet would associate with him!

Palace Intrigue

The chapter describes how, unexpectedly, the pendulum swings in favor of Solomon. Nathan and Bathsheba masterfully choreograph their approaches to King David in order to alert him, and possibly alarm him, to events happening just a few hundred yards from his bedside, at the spring of Enrogel (just outside the city of David). The manner in which Bathsheba enters the king's chamber, only to be interrupted by Nathan, who heralds the "news" of Adonijah's imminent coronation, works perfectly in bringing King David to a point of absolute lucidity.[10]

10. For analysis of the carefully crafted repetitions in this chapter, see Nehama Leibowitz, "Rebellion of Adonijah," in Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit* (*Genesis*), 3rd ed.

Bathsheba recalls an oath that David had made some years earlier: "Your son, Solomon, shall reign after me and will sit on my throne in my stead" (1:17).[11] In fact, the reader might very well question the veracity of this claim, being that it has never been mentioned previously in the Bible. Did David ever utter such a promise, or is Bathsheba somehow taking advantage of David's feeble state of mind? Yet the king's reaffirmation of the oath to Bathsheba and his detailed instructions regarding the procedure for Solomon's coronation – nine command phrases in quick succession (1:32–36) – demonstrate a lucid, quick-thinking, detail-oriented King David who is in full control of his mental faculties.[12]

We noted above the presence of Nathan the prophet in Solomon's faction, but the absence of an **act of prophecy** is quite striking. Nathan does anoint Solomon, but in this atmosphere of such confusion and disarray, one might have anticipated a divine pronouncement or a prophetic verification as to the designated identity of the monarch. What should we make of Nathan's surprisingly non-prophetic role? Moreover, all the palace intrigue and machinations make one wonder what this story is telling us. Is Solomon crowned as king because the people around David know how to manipulate him?

The style of the chapter is of a distinctly secular, political story – but this may very well be the point. The fundamental decisions are made in David's palace. Once the king, however frail, has decided who his heir will be, and once Solomon has been anointed and has ascended the king's throne, he is the king, undisputedly and without question. This is the power of central government, of the palace – the robustness of hereditary transmission.

In this vein, we should take note that this story takes place at two parallel locations, two water springs: Enrogel, **outside** the city walls, and the Gihon spring – the central water source **inside** Jerusalem. There

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(Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1976), 250–57; and Robert Alter's fine reading of this story in his book *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 98–100.

11. Interestingly, the name Bathsheba can be understood as meaning "Daughter of Oath," rather suitable for this chapter. For more possibilities regarding this oath, see 1 Chronicles 22:9.

12. According to *Sanhedrin* 22a, David's sexual virility returned at this point as well.

are two zones here: the official zone – the city; and the unauthorized – Enrogel. Adonijah's illicit coronation takes place **outside** the city. Solomon's ceremony, in contrast, bears the stamp of officialdom. It is not surprising, then, that the very moment that Adonijah's faction – which wields greater political clout than Solomon's – realizes that Solomon has been seated upon the king's throne, its coronation party immediately dissolves. Instantaneously, it becomes clear to Adonijah that his life is in peril, and he rushes to the altar to protect his life.

In a breathtaking reversal, the chapter culminates not merely with Solomon mercifully extending clemency to Adonijah, but in a scene in which Adonijah bows to King Solomon, officially accepting his new status and his governance. Indeed, the phrase "King Solomon" is restated four times in the space of three verses (1:51–53). A decision has been made and it is final, and Adonijah is forced to concede. We have no sense that Solomon feels vulnerable or threatened by this rival contender for the throne. He allows Adonijah to live; Solomon is absolutely secure in his position.

How does a situation that a moment ago seemed so contestable, inconclusive, and undetermined become instantaneously resolved? Ironically, the message that emerges from this story is precisely the stability of the monarchy, the power and force of sovereign government. In earlier periods of Israelite history, both Saul and David were anointed in secret, and their rule was accepted only after they gradually gained public support. Solomon represents a new model, ascending the throne without question, in public. The moment the king has issued his official declaration – even if other powerful candidates exist – there is an absolute transfer of power.

We remain intrigued as to the choice of Solomon, whose persona is totally absent from this drama; instead, others act on his behalf. The lack of any detailing of Solomon's character implies that he pales in comparison to the flamboyant Adonijah. While Solomon appears to be the subject of this story, his persona is essentially unimportant. What is critical is David's declaration that Solomon "will sit on my throne and will rule in my stead" (1:35). Solomon's new status is unshakable as he is saluted (in the presence of his father), "May Solomon's rule be **greater** than David's rule" (1:37, 47).

APPROACH 2: THE SHADOW OF DAVID'S SIN

There is a second approach to this story that maps the chapter from a spiritual, rather than political, perspective.

In an enigmatic commentary on the opening line of the book, "King David was old… and though they covered him with bedclothes, he never felt warm" (1:1), the Talmud comments:

> Our rabbis taught: Anyone who ridicules clothes will eventually not benefit from them. This, because David tore the corner of Saul's cloak. (*Berakhot* 62b)

In other words, David's intolerable cold and the failure of blankets to warm him is a punishment for the disrespect that he demonstrated to clothing when he cut the corner of King Saul's cloak (I Sam. 24:5).

This Talmudic lesson is harsh, although typical of the midrashic rabbinic style. One wonders why Ḥazal felt the need to dredge up David's sins of yesteryear in the opening lines of a book that focuses on the history beyond David. Ḥazal appear to be implying that there is a deeper meaning to the events of this chapter; they are intimately related to David's past.

The Sin of David and Bathsheba

Upon this backdrop, we may identify several points of contact between our chapter and David's most devastating sin – the episode of Bathsheba and Uriah (II Sam. 11–12):

1. There are only two stories which feature the three characters of David, Bathsheba, and Nathan – our chapter and the episode of David's sin with Bathsheba and Uriah.
2. The phrase in our chapter indicating that Abishag will "lie in your bosom" ("*veshakhva beḥekeikha*") (1:3) echoes the Bathsheba episode, in the prophet's analogy of the little ewe lamb that "nestled in the bosom" ("*uveḥeiko tishkav*") of the poor man – a direct reference to Bathsheba (II Sam. 12:3).
3. "Bathsheba went to the king, to his chamber; the king was very old, and Abishag the Shunammite was serving the king" (1:15).

This verse is particularly awkward. Why is it relevant that Abishag was "serving the king"? She was in his bed, warming him! One cannot read this verse without being startled by the image of Bathsheba, wife of the king, entering the bedroom to see King David with Abishag. Of course, the text reminds us that "the king was very old," and we recall that "the king did not know her," yet this scene raises the stark contrast between the young, virile David, who could not resist the temptation of Bathsheba, and his current feeble and impotent state. The coalescence of the images gives the impression of David broken and wasted, his strength having left him.

4. Bathsheba mentions David's oath to her that Solomon would be his successor. When was that oath made? As we noted above, it is not mentioned explicitly in the Bible. Radak makes the following interesting comment:

> And why did he [David] make an oath to her? After their child died, Bathsheba said: "The child died because of [our] sin. Even if we have a son who lives, he will be ridiculed by his brothers as an object of sin." And she refused to be intimate with David until he vowed that her firstborn son would succeed him as king.

According to Radak, the oath to Bathsheba was a direct outgrowth of the overwhelming burden of guilt engendered by the dreadful sin of David with Bathsheba. Again, however, this oath is mentioned only now.

The specter of David's sin resurfaces over and over in our chapter. We may conclude, therefore, that behind the overt political drama, there is a subtext that places David's sins as a background to this story. Why?

The Controversy of Solomon

Of all David's wives, Bathsheba is entangled in scandal, and her son, Solomon, would at first glance be a contentious and unlikely candidate for the succession, tainted as he is by his parents' sin. The text cannot ignore this problem. Can Solomon move beyond the past?

The conclusion is a resounding "Yes." This chapter teaches us that

Solomon is the suitable successor. This fact has already been affirmed by the book of Samuel, in verses that may have formed the textual basis for Radak's interpretation:

> David consoled his wife Bathsheba, he went and lay with her, she bore a son, and she named him Solomon; the Lord loved him. And He sent a message through the prophet Nathan, and he called his name Jedidiah (Beloved of God) at the instance of the Lord. (II Sam. 12:24–25)

These verses affirm that despite the illicit beginnings of the union between David and Bathsheba, Solomon is the "Beloved of God."

David's Withdrawal

But the shadow of the Bathsheba episode looms over David as well. A reading of II Samuel demonstrates that David has been plagued by death and ruin ever since the sin of Bathsheba. In that episode God condemned David to a terrible fate: "The sword will never leave your house… I will raise up a calamity against you from within your house; I will take your wives before your very eyes and give them to your neighbor…" (II Sam. 12:11–12). Starting with the death of Bathsheba's baby, the family is afflicted by rape, murder, treason, and revolt; four of David's children die under tragic circumstances.[13]

We suggested earlier that this chapter focuses on the power of the king, the stability of central government. But could the heir not have been named before David's old age set in? Did everything have to be decided in a haphazard scramble of backroom diplomacy?

I believe that we are witness here to a symptom of David's response to his sin. Ever since the episode of Bathsheba, David exhibits a distinct lack of involvement in public life. Unless his very survival is on the line, he seems almost resigned to the events that befall him.[14] One senses that he feels paralyzed, weighed down by his past sins.

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13. See Prof. Avraham Grossman, "David's Old Age and his Will," http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/Tanach/rishonim/grosman1.htm [Hebrew].
14. King David seems to allow himself to be manipulated by Joab to reaccept his son

This withdrawal also affects his guidance of his children. David fails to rebuke Amnon for his rape of Tamar. He never confronts Absalom for his murder of Amnon. How can he rebuke his son for sexual crimes, when he is guilty of them? How can David scold his murdering son, when he bears the weight of Uriah's death? As the text specifies regarding Adonijah, "His father never scolded him: 'Why did you do that?'" (1:6).

Additionally, King David has left a political vacuum; he has failed to designate a successor.[15] His indecision and withdrawal from public life are a direct outgrowth of his sense of guilt.

These strands all come together in our chapter. The characters of the saga of David and Bathsheba are reassembled yet again, and the choice of language recalls that terrible sin from our subconscious. Our opening chapter revisits David, paralyzed physically and inactive in the sphere of national decision-making, the very opposite of his youthful, dynamic persona.

What is our chapter communicating by presenting David in this manner? First, it informs us that David has suffered terribly for his sins. The opening chapter of 1 Kings is the final episode of his awful punishment, as the fourth of his sons is to be killed. In the words of Abarbanel:

> David sinned greatly, admitted his sin valiantly, repented fully, and received his punishment, and through this, his sins were atoned.

(11 Sam. 14). When Absalom rebels, he doesn't fight, but instead flees, avoiding confrontation (15:13). In the same episode, David allows himself to be attacked and insulted, claiming it as a punishment from God (16:9–12), and he asks Joab and his generals to "deal gently with my boy, Absalom, for my sake" (18:5), thereby sabotaging his own cause. The wide support for two rebellions – of Absalom and Sheba son of Bichri (1 Sam. 20:1) – reflects a sense of dissatisfaction with David's national administration.

15. I have suggested that David's indecision regarding a successor is a sign of being weighed down by sin. It is possible, however, that there could have been simple personal and political reasons for his failure to designate an heir, as contemporary royal life attests. King Hussein of Jordan changed his mind in the final year of his reign, as he was dying, and designated a new heir – his son Abdullah instead of his brother, Hassan.

As David honors his oath to Bathsheba, he affirms that despite the problematic past, he has paid for his various sins. Most importantly, Solomon ascends the throne clear of past complications; there is no residual stain on his monarchy.

> David pleaded before God: "Master of the Universe, forgive me for that sin." God said: "You are forgiven." David responded: "Make me a sign [of forgiveness] in my lifetime." God said: "I will not publicize it in your lifetime, but I will publicize it in your son Solomon's lifetime."
>
> When Solomon built the Temple, he sought to install the Ark in the Holy of Holies, but the gates cleaved to each other. Solomon recited twenty-four prayers but was not answered.... When he [Solomon] said: ..."O Lord, God, do not turn away Your anointed one, remember Your kindness to David," immediately he was answered [and the gates opened].... Then all of Israel knew that God had forgiven him for that sin. (*Shabbat* 30a)

The ascent of Solomon as David's successor and his building of the Temple is the clearest affirmation that David and Solomon are untainted by David's sin. David has paid his price, and the sin is absolved.

An additional lesson comes to mind in this connection. No king is immune to the consequences of his actions; even the greatest king will pay for his misdemeanors. As we shall see, this is a critical message for the book of Kings, a book in which kings perpetrate devastating crimes.