

## *David Remembers the Ark*

How odd that David (and the narrator) should now suddenly remember the ark. The ark has been shelved for a long time, following its return from the Philistines (1 Sam. 6:19–7:1). Indeed, Israel has not even thought of the ark since it was deposited in the house of Abinadab (1 Sam. 7:1–2). After twenty years of dormancy, the ark is now recalled as a vehicle for royal legitimation. David and his ideologues are engaged in a daring move. They are introducing into Israel a radical and bold innovation in the form of dynasty and royal city. With the dynasty comes bureaucracy, harem, and mercenary army, all of which are necessary props for royal power. These innovations are sure to alienate the old conservatives, so important to the control of political opinion in Israel.

In a remarkably imaginative move, David appeals to Israel's most precious ancient symbol, the ark. The ark stands at the center of the old ideology of "holy war." It bespeaks the dangerous and crucial presence of Yahweh in Israel and Yahweh's solidarity with Israel. The ark embodies what is unifying among the tribes and clans of Israel. The ark articulates and embodies for old Israel the holy rule of Yahweh.

David's new regime in Jerusalem is a radical departure from that old order and as such is in urgent need of legitimation. A lesser figure would not have tried the strategy narrated in chapter 6. But David, destiny's man that he is, can try anything and succeed. He appeals to the central symbol of the old order to legitimate a new order that decisively departs from all that was traditional. While this move may have been an act of good faith, it is also a nervy act of calculation. By his appropriation of the ark, David has placed the old conservatives in a difficult bind. They have not forgotten the significance of the ark, which referred to the raw presence of Yahweh, the power of Yahweh, and the covenantal implications of Yahweh's sovereignty. Now, under David, in order to have access to the ark and to its old significance, even conservative Israelites with long memories and keen theological sensitivity must make their pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the new city with David's new power and new ideology. They have nowhere else to go. To make contact with the ancient symbol, they must give tacit assent to the new royal apparatus.

Thus the elaborate ritual of chapter 6 is to bind together in a visible way the old ritual claims and the new ideological venture of monarchy. In light of the later

Solomonic temple (cf. [1 Kings 8:1–12](#)), we may conclude that David did his work well. Solomon could claim so much for the temple because David had so well established the legitimacy of Jerusalem. David’s daring act of legitimation functions effectively. The outcome is that Jerusalem, recently acquired from the Canaanites, is now authorized as the seat of Israel’s precious tradition, the locus of Yahweh’s presence, and the place of appeal to Yahweh in time of need (cf. [1 Kings 8:31–54](#)).

**6:1–5.** The removal of the ark to Jerusalem happens in two stages, interrupted by a grave crisis. The removal begins with a great pageant as the ark is taken from the house of Abinadab (cf. [1 Sam. 7:1–2](#)). David’s ideologues could well remember where the ark was. Its recovery and restoration to public life in Israel were done with enormous royal flourish (v. 5).

**6:6–11.** The transport of the ark from its obscure place of storage to its new place of prestige and significance is an enormously important event for David. The coming of the ark signified two things for the king. Looking back, it meant a reengagement with the taproot of Israel’s religious vitality. David here gets back in touch with the most elemental dimen-

sions of Israel’s traditional faith; it is no wonder that the movement of the ark evoked such a stupendous celebration. Looking forward, the reclaiming of the ark is an opportunity for a powerful propagandistic effort to assert the new regime as the rightful successor to the old tribal arrangement. At the same time, the narrative looks back to tribal vitality and forward to royal legitimacy. This capacity to look both ways introduces into our interpretation of the narrative an unavoidable ambiguity. Insofar as the narrative looks back, the advent of the ark bespeaks genuine religious seriousness on David’s part. Insofar as the event looks forward, there is a hint of political calculation and manipulation in David’s act. Both factors are present. The wonder is that David is able to hold them together in a kind of personal authenticity that resists choosing one factor or the other.

The ark is enormously welcome in Israel. However, the ark must not be presumed upon, taken for granted, or treated with familiarity. The holiness of God is indeed present in the ark, but that holiness is not readily available. To touch the ark is to impinge on God’s holiness, to draw too close and presume too much. Thus Uzzah suffers the same fate as the “men of Bethshemesh” in [1 Samuel 6:19](#).

Uzzah's awesome death, like the earlier deaths, evokes an awestruck question on the lips of David: "How can the ark ... come to me?" (v. 9). The death has its salutary effect; David becomes freshly afraid of Yahweh (v. 9). When people are no longer awed, respectful, or fearful of God's holiness, the community is put at risk. David may intend to use the ark for his own purposes, for religious equipment has powerful legitimating effect. Such a political use, however, does not empty the old symbol of its formidable theological power. The ark is not merely a useful tool. Beyond its utilization, there is an awesome presence to which heed must be paid.

**6:12–19.** After a three-month delay, the procession of the ark is resumed. It is clear that the ark (and Yahweh) are well-intentioned toward Israel, so that it is safe to proceed. Indeed, the custodian of the ark is blessed by Yahweh (vv. 11–12). Again there is great pageantry and a show of royal affluence (vv. 12–13). The dancing and singing respond to the assurance that God is present, that Jerusalem is now a legitimate shrine, that God is now patron and has taken up residence in David's city. The mood and intent of the celebration is one of unfettered, unashamed extravagance.

Indeed, the event evokes extravagance, for the coming of the ark is Yahweh's self-giving to David and to Israel's new political beginning. The extravagance is one of liturgy. There are endless burnt offerings and peace offerings (vv. 17–18). The community is without restraint in its gratitude for the self-giving and the presence of God. There is a social extravagance closely tied to these offerings, which are communal meals. Everyone celebrates, each with "a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins" (v. 19). Everyone has cause to rejoice, because life has started again. In addition to liturgical and social extravagance, there is royal extravagance. David broke any sedate royal pose he might have assumed when he danced without restraint before the ark and in the presence of the people (v. 14). David embodies and legitimates the gratitude of his people. This is a day to be remembered in Israel!

There has been much speculation about David's dance. At the negative extreme, it is suggested that David participated in a Canaanite ecstatic dance that became something of an orgy, and that is why he is rebuked by Michal. At the positive extreme, the dance is taken as legitimate liturgic dance, the bodily expression as proper worship. The narrative

invites such probes, but it gives us little clue about David's intention.

It is plausible that the dance of David expresses the ambiguity we have already articulated. David's dance, on the one hand expresses a genuine act of religious vitality, of genuine worship, making himself available for Yahweh's power, purpose, and presence. On the other hand, the extravagance of David, even personal, bodily extravagance, may be a political act to express profound solidarity with Yahweh in the new establishment. The foundation of the new regime and the founding of the new shrine around the ark (v. 17) most likely share in the ambiguity. It is, however, a hidden ambiguity. At face value, the day of transporting the ark is wondrous. Indeed, it is a perfect day for all parties—Yahweh, Israel, David, the priests—for all parties except Michal, Saul's daughter, David's wife. The demanding, relentless voice of the old house of Saul sounds in the midst of the celebration. It is a voice of despising (v. 16).

**6:20–23.** The abrasive note of verse 16 prepares us for this last scene. We move from a public display to a private domestic conversation, a conversation between husband and wife. David had won Michal from Saul (1 Sam. 18:25–27). He had lost

her (1 Sam. 25:44) and then claimed her a second time (2 Sam. 3:13–16). Michal is obviously important to David. As Saul's daughter she gives David legitimacy in the eyes of the old Saul party.

This is also a conversation between the voices of two conflicting factions. The narrator treats this conversation as a part of the public account of power that has important implications for the future of governance in Israel. Michal is not only David's wife but is also something of a competitor as a Saulide. We do not know why Michal despises David. Perhaps his behavior is too reminiscent of Saul's behavior when he also was out of control (1 Sam. 10:9–13; 19:20–24). Perhaps Michal does not want a husband who is out of control in public.

The situation of being out of control, however, may be crucial to the function of the narrative. Flanagan suggests (p. 368) that this out of control is the liminal point of transition between the restraints of the old tribal order and the possibilities of the new royal order:

[The scene was] a period of release from usual constraints and an occasion for creative response. It was here that the structures of the former state no longer held sway and the new state of Davidic dynasty had not yet been fully established. The dialogue between Michal

and David made explicit that the issue was the legitimacy of his house as leader in Israel.

The exchange between Michal and David is carefully crafted. She speaks sarcastically about “the king” (v. 20). Perhaps she suggests that because she is the daughter of a king, she knows how a king should act, in contrast to David, who acts unworthily. Michal speaks with authority, with an assumed voice of strength. Her speech concerns “honor” (glory), “the maids,” and “uncovering shamelessly” (v. 20). Her words drip with sarcasm and anger. David’s response to her contains the same three elements, “contemptible,” “the maids,” “honor” (glory) (v. 22). Michal believes David has forfeited the respect he must have to be ruler. David refutes her judgment by saying he may be contemptible in her eyes, but in the eyes of the maidens (and therefore of political opinion) he is more honored.

In the center of the exchange (v. 21), David makes the claim that establishes his preeminence and dismisses Michal and the entire Saulide claim. That verse begins and ends with “before the LORD.” The words pile up to establish David’s claim of legitimacy: “Yahweh chose me ... above ... above ... to be prince over ... [over].” David’s “dishonor” consists in

glad yielding to the gift of Yahweh. David is utterly Yahweh’s man, a fact Michal either cannot understand or refuses to acknowledge. The rhetoric of David’s response (vv. 22–23) evidences complete reliance on Yahweh and, at the same time, a disdainful dismissal of Michal and an end to any reliance on Saulide legitimacy. The rhetoric thus succeeds in driving an irreversible wedge between Yahweh (and David) and the Saulide patrimony now expressed by Michal. It is almost inevitable that in verse 23 the narrator finally, tersely, and without pity dismisses Michal. The future now lies with David, who has broken with this Saulide attachment.

The entire exchange moves toward the Yahwistic claim at the center:

|         |                      |
|---------|----------------------|
| Michal: | honor                |
|         | maids                |
|         | shamelessly          |
| David:  | <i>before Yahweh</i> |
|         | chose me above ...   |
|         | above                |
|         | prince over          |
|         | <i>before Yahweh</i> |
|         | contemptible         |
|         | maids                |
|         | honor                |

In the end, David is established by this confident rhetoric which refutes Michal.

David uses Michal's words to dismiss her. Michal has no future, no claim on Israel, no prospect for life. In David's utter abandonment to dance and in his liturgic, social, royal extravagance, a new order is authorized, wrought out of unrestrained yielding and worship. David is freshly legitimate. The narrative of chapter 6 concerns a shift in power, a risk of worship that embraces Yahwism and permits new order. Popular use of this text to justify liturgic dance is quite beside the point, unless liturgic dance is seen as a means whereby power is reconfigured and new political legitimacy is received. The exchange with Michal reflects a total inversion. David, who is thought to be despised by Michal, is in fact honored in Israel and by Yahweh. Michal, who thinks she is in a position of strength, is dismissed by the narrative as barren and hopeless. There is something here of the exalted being humbled and the humbled being exalted ([Matt. 23:12](#); [Luke 14:11](#); [18:14](#)). David is indeed the one who humbles himself and who, by the power of God, is exalted. The text remembers and enacts the strange singing of Hannah ([1 Sam. 2:7-8](#)).