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The Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

King David made Abigail a happy woman, but she was the exception. Over the other women along his path, as far as we can tell, David invariably cast a shadow dark and tragic.

There was Bathsheba, for example, whom the king lured into sin, which sin further prompted him, in due course, to murder her husband. Indeed, King David caused conflict even in the household of Bathsheba's birth. Her grandfather, Ahitophel, conspired against him (15:12), whereas her father, Eliam, was one of his military leaders (2 Samuel 11:4; 23:34). The little else we know of Bathsheba's life includes the death of the first child she bore to the king (2 Samuel 12:15-18) and that distinct whiff of awkwardness attendant on their final meeting (1 Kings 1:15-16).

Then there was Michal, Saul's younger daughter and David's first wife. Her fascination with the new hero (18:20), himself already popular among the local women (18:6-7), probably shielded her girlish heart from knowing, at first, that she was only a pawn in the deeper plans of Saul (18:21). Soon, nonetheless, her devotion to her husband obliged Michal to take sides against her father and then lie about it (19:11-17).

Saul, for his part, had other plans for Michal. At David's exile, she was taken away from him and given as wife to Palti, of whom we know only that he loved her - perhaps the sole man that ever did - and was the father of her five children (Josephus, Antiquities 7.4.3). David himself also married again, first to Abigail, then to Ahinoam. All three of these marriages are mentioned together, as though to indicate that "things were over" between Michal and David (25:43-44).

After the death of Saul, however, in the peace negotiations that David conducted with the party of the late king, he demanded that Michal be returned to him. Accordingly, she was abducted from Palti, who reacted in one of the Bible's most poignant lines: "Then her husband went along with her to Bahurim, weeping behind her" (2 Samuel 3:16). Thus, Saul was

not the last man to deal with Michal as a political pawn.

Michal became but a trophy in David's court, and perhaps it was the bitterness of her life, in part, that prompted Michal to sarcasm about the king's dancing before the Ark (6:16,20). No king is safely mocked to his face, however, and apparently Michal was never again invited to the royal bed (6:21-23). Forcibly exiled from her one devoted husband and five children, did Michal ever know another day of happiness?

Merab, Michal's older sister (1 Samuel 14:49), was a third woman to whom the thought of David meant nothing but misery. As the daughter that Saul promised in marriage to whatever warrior defeated Goliath (17:25; 18:17), Merab seemed destined to become the wife of David, but the wedding was called off, perhaps because Saul learned of the younger sister's preference. Merab was given, instead, to Darius the Meholathite (18:19-20; 2 Samuel 21:8), to whom she bore five sons. We would like to add that they all lived happily ever after.

We would like to say that, but in fact they did not live happily ever after. Years later the delayed shadow of David fell at last across the path of Merab. The king, constrained to hand over seven descendants of Saul to satisfy an ancient grudge of the Gibeonites (21:1-6), chose the five sons of Merab to be of their number (21:8). Then, in one of the truly tenebrous lines of Scripture, the Gibeonites "hanged them on a hill before the Lord" (21:9). With that last notice of her tragedy, the loss of all five children on single day, forlorn Merab disappeared from history, mentioned by neither Chronicles nor Josephus.

And last there was sad Rizpah, Saul's concubine who bore him two sons. When these two were joined with the five sons of Merab to make up the seven slain by the avenging Gibeonites (21:8), Rizpah stood a lonely, wretched guard over those suspended corpses decomposing in the sun; "she did not allow the birds of the air to rest on them by day nor the beasts of the field by night" (21:10). This desperate labor of devotion earned Rizpah the respect of King David himself, who had caused to overflow her cup of sorrow, even unto flood (21:11-14).

The Bible holds out to us the example of David for emulation

in several respects. His treatment of women seems not therein to be included.

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