

# 1 Kings 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     1 Kings chapter 1. Now King David was old and advanced in years, and although they covered him with clothes, he could not get warm. Therefore his servants said to him, Let a young woman be sought for my lord the king, and let her wait on the king and be in his service. Let her lie in your arms, that my lord the king may be warm. So they sought for a beautiful young woman throughout all the territory of Israel, and found Abishag the Shunammite, and brought her to the king.

The young woman was very beautiful, and she was of service to the king and attended to him, but the king knew her not. Now Adonijah the son of Haggith exalted himself, saying, I will be king, and he prepared for himself chariots and horsemen, and fifty men to run before him. His father had never at any time displeased him by asking, Why have you done thus and so? He was also a very handsome man, and he was born next after Absalom. He conferred with Joab the son of Zeruijah, and with Abiathar the priest, and they followed Adonijah and helped him. But Zadok the priest, and Benaniah the son of Jehoiada, and Nathan the prophet, and Shimei, and Rii, and David's mighty men were not with Adonijah. Adonijah sacrificed sheep, oxen, and fattened cattle by the serpent's stone, which is beside Enrogel, and he invited all his brothers, the king's sons, and all the royal officials of Judah. But he did not invite Nathan the prophet, or Benaniah, or the mighty men, or Solomon his brother. Then Nathan said to Bathsheba the mother of Solomon, Have you not heard that Adonijah the son of Haggath has become king, and David our lord does not know it? Now therefore come, let me give you advice that you may save your own life, and the life of your son

Solomon. Go in at once to King David, and say to him, Did you not, my lord the king, swear to your servant, saying, Solomon your son shall reign after me, and he shall sit on my throne? Why then is Adonijah king? Then while you are still speaking with the king, I also will come in after you and confirm your words. So Bathsheba went to the king in his chamber. Now the king was very old, and Abishag the Shunammite was attending to the king. Bathsheba bowed and paid homage to the king, and the king said, What do you desire? She said to him, My lord, you swore to your servant by the lord your god, saying, Solomon your son shall reign after me, and he shall sit on my throne. And now behold, Adonijah is king, although you, my lord the king, do not know it. He has sacrificed oxen, fattened cattle, and sheep in abundance, and has invited all the sons of the king, Abiathar the priest, and Joab the commander of the army. But Solomon your servant, he has not invited. And now, my lord the king, the eyes of all Israel are anew, to tell them who shall sit on the throne of my lord the king after him. Otherwise it will come to pass, when my lord the king sleeps with his fathers, that I and my son Solomon will be counted offenders. While she was still speaking with the king, Nathan the prophet came in, and they told the king, Here is Nathan the prophet. And when he came in before the king, he bowed before the king, with his face to the ground. And Nathan said, My lord the king, have you said, Adonijah shall reign after me, and he shall sit on my throne? For he has gone down this day, and has sacrificed oxen, fattened cattle, and sheep in abundance, and has invited all the king's sons, the commanders of the army, and Abiathar the priest. And behold, they are eating and drinking before him, and saying,

Long live king Adonijah, but me, your servant, and Zadok the priest, and Benaniah the son of Jehoiada, and your servant Solomon, he has not invited. Has this thing been brought about by my lord the king, and you have not told your servants who should sit on the throne of my lord the king after him?

Then king David answered, Call Bathsheba to me. So she came into the king's presence, and stood before the king. And the king swore, saying, As the lord lives, who has redeemed my soul out of every adversity, as I swore to you by the lord the god of Israel, saying, Solomon your son shall reign after me, and he shall sit on my throne in my place, even so will I do this day. Then Bathsheba bowed with her face to the ground, and paid homage to the king, and said, May my lord king David live forever.

[ 4 : 11 ] King David said, Call to me Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and Benaniah the son of Jehoiada. So they came before the king. And the king said to them, Take with you the servants of your lord, and have Solomon my son ride on my own mule, and bring him down to Gihon. And let Zadok the priest, and Nathan the prophet there anoint him king over Israel. Then blow the trumpet, and say, Long live king Solomon. You shall then come up after him, and he shall come and sit on my throne, for he shall be king in my place. And I have appointed him to be ruler over Israel and over Judah. And Benaniah the son of Jehoiada answered the king, Amen. May the lord, the god of my lord the king, say so. As the lord has been with my lord the king, even so may he be with Solomon, and make his throne greater than the throne of my lord king David. So Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and Benaniah the son of Jehoiada, and the Cherethites and the Pelethites went down, and had Solomon ride on king David's mule, and brought him to Gihon. There Zadok the priest took the horn of oil from the tent, and anointed Solomon. Then they blew the trumpet, and all the people said,

Long live king Solomon. And all the people went up after him, playing on pipes, and rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth was split by their noise. Adonijah and all the guests who were with him heard it as they finished feasting. And when Joab heard the sound of the trumpet, he said, What does this uproar in the city mean? While he was still speaking, behold, Jonathan the son of Abiath the priest came, and Adonijah said, Come in, for you are a worthy man, and bring good news.

Jonathan answered Adonijah, No, for our lord king David has made Solomon king, and the king has sent with him Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and Benaniah the son of Jehoiada, and the Cherethites and the Pelethites. And they had him ride on the king's mule. And Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet have anointed him as king at Gihon, and they have gone up from their rejoicing, so that the city is in an uproar. This is the noise that you have heard. Solomon sits on the royal throne.

Moreover, the king's servants came to congratulate our lord king David, saying, May your god make the name of Solomon more famous than yours, and make his throne greater than your throne. And the king bowed himself on the bed. And the king also said, Blessed be the lord, the god of Israel, who has granted someone to sit on my throne this day, my own eyes seeing it. Then all the guests of Adonijah trembled and rose, and each went his own way. And Adonijah feared Solomon, so he arose and went and took hold of the horns of the altar. Then it was told Solomon, Behold, Adonijah fears king Solomon, for behold, he has laid hold of the horns of the altar, saying, Let king Solomon swear to me first that he will not put his servant to death with the sword. And Solomon said, If he will show himself a worthy man, not one of his hairs shall fall to the earth, but if wickedness is found in him, he shall die. So king Solomon sent, and they brought him down from the altar. And he came and paid homage to king Solomon. And Solomon said to him, Go to your house. 1 Kings chapter 1 begins with

David being old and cold. The beautiful young Abishag is brought to warm his bed, but David does not have sexual relations with her. This is a very strange note on which to begin a book of the Bible. David is in bed with Abishag while the nation is in crisis. We might perhaps be reminded of his sin with Bathsheba when he was on his couch at the beginning while the nation was at war. However, this might also be a way of describing his weakness. David is apparently lacking in sexual potency. He's not knowing the young beautiful woman who's lying in his bed. And this is related to his political impotency as the husband of the nation. It might remind us also of the concubines who remained like widows after the return of David to Jerusalem. In the next chapter, another man will try and take this woman Abishag for himself, along with the kingdom. Seeing the weakness of his father, Adonijah, one of David's sons, tries to set himself up as king. And this is all very reminiscent of Absalom. In 2 Samuel chapter 15 verse 1, the description of Absalom is more or less exactly the same as Adonijah here.

[ 8 : 20 ] After this, Absalom got himself a chariot and horses, and 50 men to run before him. Adonijah is described in his appearance as being attractive like Absalom. In 2 Samuel chapter 14 verse 25, Now in all Israel there was no one so much to be praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom.

From the sole of his foot to the crown of his head, there was no blemish in him. Adonijah is supported by Joab, who is probably the real power in the kingdom at this point. And now he is taking sides in a coup against David. He is also supported by Abiathar the priest.

He invites key people, the king's sons and the royal officials of Judah, but he does not invite Nathan, Benaiah, or the mighty men or Solomon. The key loyalists of David are excluded. And this is indicative of a coup being staged. Certain members of the administration are going to be displaced by others. Joab in particular has been a troublemaker for a long time. We should also be clear that Solomon has already been appointed as crown prince. Joab, however, seemed to resist the idea of Solomon being king from the very beginning. Nathan, Bathsheba, and Solomon reappear at this point, once again reminding us of the story of 2 Samuel. There is something of an emergency. A coup is underway, led by the most powerful men in the land, and the king is impotent. He's lying in bed. Nathan and Bathsheba need to make a shrewd plan to rouse David to action. They need to do this for their own sake. Adonijah would clearly perceive Bathsheba and Solomon as threats, and also Nathan. David had sworn an oath that Solomon, his son, should reign after him and sit on his throne. And Bathsheba and Nathan both come in to remind him of this promise in the way that they frame their statements. Nathan instructs Bathsheba. He emphasizes the contrast between David's promise and the reality, and maybe implies guilt on David's part that David has not prevented this from taking place. Bathsheba, however, as she speaks to David, contrasts David's promise with the situation, focusing upon the fact that David does not know it.

David should, as the king and her husband, feel the sting of his lack of knowledge and his seeming inability to implement his word and his promise. Nathan at this point comes in. He feigns ignorance of David's involvement. He asks whether David had orchestrated the situation. It will be a painful admission on David's part to acknowledge that the situation had arisen entirely out of his control and apart from his plan. Adonijah's actions are described four times, and the contrasts are worth noting. There are increasing references to details, and it's an elaboration in each account. And those greater elaborations are designed to spur David to action. And each time there's an added blow of the details. For instance, comparing the accounts of Bathsheba, followed by the account of Nathan.

And now behold, Adonijah is king, although you, my lord the king, do not know it. He has sacrificed oxen, fattened cattle, and sheep in abundance, and has invited all the sons of the king, Abiath the priest, and Joab the commander of the army. But Solomon your servant he has not invited. In verses 18 to 19.

[ 11 : 32 ] In verses 25 to 26, Nathan gives his account. For he has gone down this day and has sacrificed oxen, and fattened cattle, and sheep in abundance, and has invited all the king's sons, the commanders of the army, and Abiath the priest. And behold, they are eating and drinking before him, and saying, Long live king Adonijah. But me, your servant, and Zadok the priest, and Ben-Niah the son of Jehoiada, and your servant Solomon he is not invited. Bathsheba's account would be a blow, and then Nathan's account takes that even further.

It adds details that would have made that blow hit harder. There's no reference, however, in either of these accounts to the involvement of the royal officials. Bathsheba and Nathan are concerned to rouse David to action. They don't want to discourage him to give him the sense that he cannot actually overcome this coup. And if they mention the royal officials, it might be too discouraging a detail. It might make him think that Adonijah's coup is a done deal. Both Bathsheba and Nathan are very careful to allude to, or invert the words of David's promise made to Bathsheba concerning Solomon. Both of them underline the promise that David himself has made, by taking up its words and moving them around. The promise hadn't been given to Nathan, but Nathan inverts the promise to refer it to Adonijah to drive home the point. Have you said this? David's response is to reaffirm the promise to Bathsheba, and immediately to set the ball rolling to dispel all uncertainty, and establish Solomon as his successor. Adonijah is probably banking upon David's impotence at this point, and now that David has been spurred to action, he will find that his plan soon evaporates. A public spectacle is needed to counter

Adonijah's attempt at the throne. While Adonijah's feast seems to be restricted more to the leadership, especially of Judah, Solomon's anointing is more of a public spectacle, involving the blowing of a trumpet, a procession, an open celebration, loud music, and a triumphal entry into the city. Adonijah and his men hear the noise of the celebration and wonder what is going on. Jonathan, the son of Abiathar, comes bearing the news of what's happening. Adonijah presumes that it is good news. We might recall a similar episode back in 2 Samuel chapter 18, when Ahimeaz, the son of Zadok, came bearing news of the victory over Absalom's coup from Joab to David. There might be a sort of ironic inversion here. Jonathan recounts all that David has done in publicly establishing Solomon as king. Once again, there is an elaboration of details in Jonathan's account, much as the news of Adonijah's feast had been developed in the tellings.

And the force of this account leads Adonijah and his guests to depart in great fear. Adonijah flees for his life to the altar and takes hold of its horns, while his guests slink back to their homes. Grabbing the horns of the altar was like running to a city of refuge in some sense. Solomon summons him and says that he will be spared if he proves faithful, but if he rebels he will be destroyed. This is Solomon's first action as king. He shows clemency at this point, but he will also be firm in his judgment if Adonijah tries anything. Solomon's firm hand over his administration marks an immediate contrast between him and David. David, in his elderly state, is not able to run his kingdom. He does not know what's going on. He is not able to master things or to keep his promises simply because people are not observing his word. Solomon, however, immediately proves himself to be effective.

A question to consider. Why do you think that the author of the books of kings decided to begin his story with David weak and impotent in bed? How does beginning with this shape the character of the narrative of this chapter?

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