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Three kings - the drama of Saul, David and Solomon, 1953.

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THREE KINGS

The Drama of Saul, David and Solomon

December 13, 1953

Jewish history, my dear friends, is not predomininately a history of kings or conquests. I believe it was Emperor Julian who taunted the Jewish people for not having produced an Alexander the Great. The Jewish heroes are not generals, world conquerors, though the Jews did produce a number of first-rate generals too. Jewish history is rather a history of prophets and sages, teachers of mankind. And that is why perhaps the Jewish people have survived while other peoples who have produced these great conquerors of mankind have disappeared from the stage of history. But Israel also had a political history. It was a nation, besides being a religious community, and as such it had its rulers, its kings. The period of the kings extended for about 400 years before the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah at the beginning of the sixth century before the common era, and then we have a short period centuries later of Jewish kings who ruled over Palestine following the Maccabean victory of the re-establishment of the political independence of the State of Israel. But that period was relatively short. Between the year approximately 1000 before the common era and 600 there ruled over the people a succession of kings who ruled either over a United Kingdom, or after 935 the divided kingdom - the Kingdom of the Norththe Kingdom of Israel, and the Kingdom of the South - the Kingdom of Judah.

Only three kings ruled over a United Israel, from about the year 1020 to about 935 - Saul, David, and Solomon, Kings who left their imprint on Jewish history and on Jewish literature, to this day. All three of them are very intriguing, interesting, fascinating characters, personalities. So much so that they have been the subject of great paintings, sculpture and drama, poetry and music to this day. People are still writing about David, Saul, Solomon, composing music using the drama of their lives as the theme of their compositions. Some artists have always found a challenge to their artistic expression in the lives and the events of these three kings of

Israel.

The kings didn't fare so well among the Jewish people as they did among all the other Criental peoples. They were never treated as Gods. They were never worshipped. Statues were never erected to their honor. It is interesting to recall that from the earliest prehistoric times, from the Bronze Age right through the early civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome, kings were deified, worshipped, sacrifices were offered to them. Kings were above the law; in fact, they were the law. To criticize them was an act of - an impious act. To obey them was a religious obligation. Now the kings of Israel were never treated as gods or as demigods. They were looked upon as possessed of no special divine nature, endowments. They were not exempt from the operations of the moral law of society binding upon all citizens. No images were made of these Kings of Israel and set up in the sanctuary. They never possessed that absolutism which was possessed by many of the rulers of the ancient world. That of course is another by-product of the fundamental democratic instincts, the traditions of the Jewish people which they brought with them from the wilderness, Arabia, where they had lived countless generations into the settled life of Canaan. I read you the chapter from the Book of Samuel about Kings - how Samuel, who annointed the first king of Israel, Saul, warned the people, told them that their demand for a king was in a way a running counter to the will of God. But then he was forced by the clamor and the insistence of the people to give them a king. Samuel, says the Bible, "told the people the right and duties of the kingship and he wrote them into a book and laid it up before the Lord." Now what these rights and duties of the King were aren't prescribed in the book of Deuteronomy, where the King is admonished always to keep a copy of the Law of the Torah before him that his heart may not be lifted up above his brethren, that he may not turn aside from the Commandments, either to the right hand or to the left. He was not to multiply horses, he was not to multiply wives, he was not to build himself up into great royal magnificence, power. Frequently as we shall

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have occasion to see, the King was confronted, challenged, denounced by the Prophet who spoke for the religious genius of the people.

How did kings come to rule in Israel in the first place? After they left Egypt, you will recall, Moses led them through the wilderness for some 40 years and then brought them to the gates of Canaan, and there he died and turned over his command to Joshua. Joshua, a first-rate general, led the people into Canaan, and there followed a period of about 200 years of what you might call the "battle years" of Israel. The struggle of the people - of the tribes of the people, for they were not really a unified people at the time - to gain a foothold in Canaan. They had many enemies to fight - the Canaanites, Moabites, Ammonites, Midianites, and the many other peoples who were the earlier settlers of Canaan. And they were ruled by those 200 years by a group of men who were called in our Bible the Judges. The story is found in the Pook of Judges. They were not judges in the present modern sense of the word, but they were chieftains who were summoned as the emergency arose to lead a tribe or a group of tribes against an enemy which threatened them. Among these Judges or chieftains were men of the type of Ehud and Deborah and Gideon and Jephtah and Samson. But there soon came a time where there arose an enemy who threatened the total annihilation of the Hebraic tribes in Canaan, and those were the Philistines, a powerful people living in the southwest part of Palestine, a war-like people who possessed iron which the Hebrews of those days did not yet have (they were still living in the Bronze Age). The Philistines had their chariots: they were masters of all the plain land, the level land, of Palestine. And then they began to put pressure on the Jewish tribes who had settled around them. These Philistines must have come, according to the best knowledge now available to archaeology, either from the Island of Crete, Cappadotia; they may have been an Hellenic people or they may have been driven out of their homes by the northern invasion of the Hellenes who swept down from Europe over Greece and the islands of the Aegean. Many of these Philistines settled in Palestine around the year 1200 around the time of the

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Hebrew tribes were coming into the country. And around the year 1000 they began to endanger the very existence of these Hebrew tribes. Then the need arose for a greater unity among them, for a consolidation of their strength. And so they began to clamor for a king to unite them. Samuel, who favored their union, felt that they could be united in a theocracy, where not a king but a priest, a religious leader would be their head. But no, the people wanted a king like the other nations, like the Philistines had. Finally Samuel yielded and reluctantly appointed and annointed the first king over a united Israel, Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin.

Saul began the consolidation of the tribe, their unification, and he began the counter-attack against the Philistines. Saul was a very loyal, devoted king, a selfless man, and he had checked for a time the onrush of the Philistines and gave the twelve tribes or as many of them as their were at that time in Canaan a chance to close their ranks to become a more united people, although in the end Saul was defeated, in the famous battle of Gilboa, where hard pressed by the Philistines, he took his own life, and where his son Jonathan and Jonathan's two brothers were also killed in the battle.

The life of King Saul was not a happy one. He was a moody man, a tempermental man, and he was given to attacks of melancholy, when only music seemingly could lift the caul of depression from his spirit. And it is this fact that brought him in contact with young David, the young shepherd, who could sing and play the harp and who helped him when his dangerous moods came upon him. This young David was to become the Nemesis throughout the life of King Saul. He embittered his life, unwittingly, unwillingly, because Saul was a very jealous man. He saw, for example in the victory of young David over the leader of the Philistines, Goliath, a threat to his own throne. He came to fear that young David was plotting treason against him. He sought to kill David. When Saul's own son, Jonathan, who loved David dearly, sought to defend and protect David, Saul turned against his own son. Saul pursued David until the very end of his life, even though David twice saved the life of King Saul. S_nul even came to break with Samuel, the prophet, the man who had selected him and annointed

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him King over Israel. Before this battle of Gilboa, where he finally perished, Saul, a distraught and a desperate man wanted to talk with the prophet Samuel who was now dead. And so though he himself saw driven from the land all necromances and all wizards, he nevertheless went to the witch of (you may recall that legend from the Bible) and requested her to bring out the ghost of Samuel so that he could speak to the prophet. And the ghost of Samuel appeared, and King Saul said to the prophet, "Tomorrow I face the Philistines. I have a feeling that we shall be defeated in the battle and that I will be slain. Can you give me a word of comfort for tomorrow?" And the prophet Samuel had no word of comfort for Saul. The death of Saul and J_onathan was lamented by David in a superb poem which is found in the Second Book of Samuel;

Thy glory, oh Israel, is slain upon the high places. How are the mighty fallen! Tell it not in Gath, Publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon; Lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice,

Lest the daughters of the Philistines exhault.

Ye mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor upsurging of the deep;

For there the shield of the mighty defiled, the shield of Saul, not annointed with oil.

From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan turned not back,

And the sword of Saul returned not empty.

Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely, in life and in death they were not divided. They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.

Ye daughters of Israel, weel over Saul,

Who clothed you daintily in scarlet, who put ornaments of gold upon your apparel.

How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle!

Jonathan lies slain upon thy high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; Very pleasant have you been to me; Your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. How are the mighty fallen,

And the weapons of war perished.

It was David who became king after Saul, David, who established a dynasty which was to last for nearly 400 years until the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians. The restoration of this dynasty was hoped for and prayed for in all subsequent centuries by the Jewish people. The Messiah was to be a descendant of the House of David. In fact, the early Christians trace the ancestry of Jesus back to King David, as we read in the New Testament. David was an heroic, colorful personality, many-sided, a personality of light and shadow, a man who loved and hated deeply, richly talented; in his young days, an adventurer, a free-booter, chief of a robber band, troubadour. Michelangelo caught something of this young David in the magnificent statue of his now in the city of Florence, David with a sling about to enter the combat with Goliath. David, born a shepherd became the bosom friend of the prince, married the king's daughter, himself finally ascended the throne; a very ambitious, a very purposeful, but not a ruthless and not an unkind king. David completed what Saul had begun. He finally crushed the Philistines. He captured their stronghold, the stronghold of the Jebuzites, Jerusalem, and made it the capital of the united Israel, the most famous city in the world. Forever after, Jerusalem came to be known as the (Hebrew) the City of David. The people knew him not only as a fighter, as a warrior, as a king, but even as a poet, and a singer, and they ascribed to him the entire Book of Psalms, that amazing collection of 150 religious poems, which is the very treasure of the spirit of our people. Of course David did not write the Psalms, certainly not all

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of them, but because he was known as the "sweet singer in Israel" and undoubtedly composed poems, tradition ascribed to him all of the great poetry of ancient Israel. David was a strong king, ruled with a firm hand. He was also at times a very weak man. One of the deep shadows in his reign was the episode with Bath-Sheba after whom he lusted and whom he took from her husband Uriah and followed up his immoral act by a crime conspiring and bringing to pass the death of Uriah. Those were common practices among royalty in the ancient world and they did not go unchallenged, such acts in Israel. When this act of King David came to the ears of the Prophet Nathan, Nathan came before the King, and I read from the twelfth chapter of the second Book of Samuel:

(Amazing thing, prophet, a humble man, non-professional, no power except the power of God, appearing in the palace, unsurmoned, before King David because the Lord had sent him.) And the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing, nothing but one little yew lamb which he had bought and he brought it up; it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and the rich man was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him." Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said, to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die." And Nathan said to David, "You are the man." Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, "I annointed you king over Israel, I delivered you out of the hand of Saul, and I gave you your master's house and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah, and if this were too little I would have added to you as much more. Why have you despised the word of the Lord to do what is evil in his sight. You have smitten Uriah the Hittite with a sword and have taken

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his wife to be your wife and have slain him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now, therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house." Thus says the Lord, "Behold I will raise up evil against you out of your own house, for you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun." And David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord."

David was to atone for his sin in a very grievous manner. "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." That held good of the kings of ancient Israel as it did of the kings of England. Rebellion broke out in the country in David's old age, and of all the people who placed themselves at the head of this revolt against the king, was David's own son, Absalom, the son whom he loved, the son whom he had indulged so much. And the old king had to flee from Jerusalem because of the revolt and wander about for many days and weeks and months. And finally the armies of Absalom and the armies of King David joined in battle, and Absalom was slain, David's beloved son, was killed fighting against his own father.

And I read you now from the 18th chapter of the Second Book of Samuel. Here is King David waiting for the report of the battle, waiting to hear what would be the outcome of the battle, waiting especially to hear about his son, Absalom. But as I read you these chapters from the Bible, I would like you also to think of the grandeur of style, of the magnificence of writing that you have here; the oldest, perhaps, historidal writing of mankind:

"Now David was sitting between the two gates, and the watchman went up to the roof of the gate by the wall and when he lifted up his eyes and looked, he saw a man, running alone, and the watchman called out to the king and told the king, and the king said, "If he is alone, there are tidings in his mouth." And he came apace and drew near, and then the watchman saw another man running, and the watchman called to the gate and said, "See! Another man running alone." And the king said, "He also brings tidings." And the watchman said, "I think the running of the foremost is like the running of Ahimaaz the son of Zadok."

And the King said, "He is a good man. He comes with good tidings." Then Ahimaaz

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cried out to the King, "All is well." He bowed before the King with his face to the earth and said, "Blessed be the Lord your God who has delivered up themen who raised their hand against the Lord the King." And the King said, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" And Ahimaaz answered, "When Joab sent your servant I saw a great tumult, but I do not know what it was." And the King said, "Turn aside and stand here." So he turned aside and stood still, and behold a Cushi came, and the Cushi said, "Good tidings for my Lord the King, for the Lord has delivered you this day from the power of all who rose up against you." The King said to the Cushi, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" The Cushi answered, "Nay, the enemies of my Lord the King and all who rise up against you for evil be like that young man." And the King was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom, would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son;"

When King David died, his son Solomon ruled after him. All the labors and the wars of Saul and David saw their full fruition in the reign of King Solomon. A brilliant reign, opulent, peaceful reign. The country was tremendously properous during the reign of Solomon, so much so that the Bible says (Hebrew)

"Silver was accounted for nothing in the House of Solomon. Wealth poured in from all sides. Trade and commerce were expanded to distant parts of the world. Fleets of ships were sent by King Solomon to Southern , Eastern Africa, even as far as India, carrying cargo there and bringing gold and precious stones and ivory and sandalwood and even apes and peacocks. Solomon opened many mines, many copper mines, established smelting works at Ezion-Geber, recently unearthed by archaeologists. The famous stables of King Solomon were brought to light recently at Megiddo. King Solomon was a great builder, he builded fortresses and garrisons, and harbors, and palaces. In the palace in Jerusalem there was the famous throne of ivory, which was the admiration of part of the ancient world, and golden shields for his bodyguards. And of course King Solomon built the Temple, the Temple which

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David, his father, wanted to build but was not permitted by God because his hands had spilled so much blood. King Solomon built the Temple, beautified it, furnished it magnificently, established it as a central sanctuary of the people and made it, as he said in his dedicatory prayer, made the Temple "a house of prayer for all people."

King Solomon was known as a very wise man. His fame, the fame of his wisdom, spread throughout the ancient world. He had asked for wisdom, you may recall, just before he was crowned king. God offered him anything he asked for, but all (Hebiew) that King Solomon requested was a , a wise and understanding heart. Because of his wisdom, he attracted people from all parts of the world. You know, of course, the famous story about the Queen of Sheba who came from distant Ethiopia, having learned of the wisdom and of the brilliance of the young king of Israel. His judicial wisdom was illustrated in the Bible by that famous story of how Solomon determined who was the true mother of the infant which two women claimed. Because of his great wisdom three of the books of the Bible were ascribed by tradition to King Solomon, The Song of Songs, the Book of Proverbs, and the Book of Ecclesiastes. The rabbi said that whence King Solomon was a young man, he wrote the Song of Songs, quite naturally, the song of love and of spring and of the spaciousness and the beauty and exhaltation of life. When he was a middle-aged man he wrote the Book of Proverbs, how a person should conduct himself wisely in life. And when he became an old man, he wrote the Book of Ecclesiastes, the theme of which is, "vanity, oh vanity, all is vanity."

Well, King Solomon was wise in all things but one. He married 700 wives and had 300 concubines - rather excessive by any standards. Many of his wives, of course, were married for political purposes; whenever an alliance was made with the neighboring people, this was the way in which they sealed the contract, as it were, by marriage. These wives, coming from heathen lands, naturally brought with them their idols and their worship and turned the mind of the king away from the worship of the one true God. Here again, as in the case of King David, the religious spirit

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of Israel revolted against it. Didn't like it at all. And so we read in the first book of Kings, chapter 11: "Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, the daughter of Pharoah, Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite Zidonian, and Hittite women from the nations concerning which the Lord had said unto the people of Israel, Ye shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods; and Solomon clung to these in love. He had 700 wives, and princesses, and 300 concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father.

For Solomon went after Ashtoreth, the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom, the abomination of the Ammonites.

So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and did not wholly follow the Lord as David, his father, had done.

Then Solomon build a high place, that is an alter, for Chemosh, the abominap tion of Moab, and for Molech, the abomination of the Ammonites on the mountain east of Jerusalem.

And so he did for all his foreign wives who burnt incense and sacrificed to their gods.

And the Lord was angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the Lord the God of Israel who had appeared to him twice and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods; but he did not keep what the Lord commanded.

Therefore the Lord said to Solomon, Since this has been your mind and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes, which I have commanded thee, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and will give it to your servant.

If for the sake of David your father I will not do it in your days, but I will tear it out from the hand of your son.

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However, I will not tear away all the kingdom, but I will give one tribe to your son for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen.

And of course this is a post-event prognostication of what actually took place, for when King Solomon died people rose in rebellion. He had taxed them too heavily for the building of these magnificent palaces and fortresses. The people could not stand the crushing load of the taxation, so when he died and the people came to his heir, his son, Rheoboam, and said, "Will you deign to lighten the burden of our taxation? We can't bear it any more!" The wise men advised the king to agree. His young boon companions advised him no to. And so he sent word back to the delegation of the people, "If my father's burden was a little finger, mine will be a thumb!" The people took the hint and immediately a revolt spread throughout the land, civil war set in, the United Kingdom which had endured under three kings was now divided. In 935 and thereafter we have the history of two kingdoms, the ingdom of the north with its capital in Samaria which endured until 722 when it was overthrown by the Assyrians, and the kingdom of Judah in the south with its capital in Jerusalem which was finally overthrown by the Babylonians in 586.

And so ended the story of the Three Kings. What remained of their reign was first, a firmer footing in Canaan for their people, a stronger sense of what you politically might call peoplehood, even though the nation was now split in half - there was always the hope of its re-unification, and the central sanctuary in Jerusalem which was to become the spiritual center of the people for centuries to come. Soon there were to appear the great Prophets, who ushered in a new day for Israel and for mankind - a much more significant contribution than the kings made; nevertheless the kings do belong to the important political history of Israel, they do belong to the rich tapestry of 3500 years of a great peoples history.

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