

June 30, Ordinary 13B (2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27)

Maybe the Song of the Bow is an Iron Age propaganda drop. Or maybe it's just a song.

by [Brad Roth](#) in the [June 2024](#) issue

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Once I walked into a touristy store in a little town in the mountains. Something about the place spooked me in a crystals-and-crow-feathers sort of way, so I turned around. But before I got out the door, a navy T-shirt emblazoned with a golden bee caught my eye. When the owner invited me to try it on, I responded, "I don't know what the bee means." He looked me over and said, "It's just a bee."

At the beginning of 2 Samuel, things have shifted decisively in David's favor. Saul, his rival for the kingship, is dead. Jonathan, his "greatly beloved" friend and brother in arms, is also gone, killed in battle by the Philistines (1 Sam. 31:2; 2 Sam. 1:26). In their honor, David composes a lamentation called the Song of the Bow. Why?

The reader can be forgiven for detecting a cynical ploy to clothe a naked interregal conflict with a few golden words. After all, David has just spent the better part of 1 Samuel charismatically building up his power base while Saul seeks to kill him. If the winners write history, then David writes this one as a song that nods to his righteous innocence and promotes the inviolability of God's anointed king. Maybe the Song of the Bow is an Iron Age propaganda drop.

Or maybe it's just a song, and David actually means it.

The Song of the Bow is an epic poem lionizing (literally in verse 23) Saul and Jonathan, praising them as the "glory" of Israel, the "mighty" who were an anointed shield defending God's people and whose bow and sword led the people in war. They were "beloved and lovely." Let the "daughters of Israel" who once praised Saul's prowess in battle now weep (1 Sam. 18:7; 2 Sam. 1:24). Let the mountains and fields dry up in mourning.

David's song points to the mysterious gift that marked his life and bound men and women and ultimately a nation to him in love. People didn't follow David because he possessed strength or skill with a sword. Saul had that too. But David had a magnetic heart and a poet's ear. David lived from something deep-down true.

This is why his psalms are so potent. They're true words tapping something true in his life. Sure, the shepherd boy understands that "the Lord is my shepherd" (1 Sam. 17:34; Ps. 23:1). But he also pens the tender "my soul is like the weaned child that is with me" (Ps. 131:2), the brutal confessional of Psalm 51 ("I know my transgressions"), and the unabashed longing of Psalm 63 ("O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water"). Poetry buzzed in David's heart.

Of course, the magic isn't just that David had a penchant for epic poetry. You could say that about any Tom, Dick, or Ashurbanipal. What makes David's life an authentic life that prompted books of sacred history (1, 2 Samuel; 1, 2 Chronicles) and the treasuring and passing on of his verse is that he lived in response to what Eugene Peterson calls the "previousness of God's speech." His songs of praise and reverence and lament flowed from God's word welling up within him, and in that way David was really a prophet (Acts 2:30).

Do we believe this when we come to the Song of the Bow? Our cultural moment primes us to see everything from the perspective of power. We ask: Who gains? What's the hidden agenda? We're prone to make the most cynical interpretation of others' motives, which ultimately risks becoming a kind of otherizing that loses sight of their humanity. We are so unaccustomed to hearing true prophetic voices, rather than the usual voices megaphoned up to prophetic volume, that we struggle to make heads or tails of Nahum or Paul or Mary or David. Cynicism leads us to miss the plain goodness of God speaking something true through another person.

Because we hear others with cynicism, we can also assume that others doubt our own sincerity. Sometimes, I find myself searching for roundabout language to speak the simplest and most necessary truths: God is good, Jesus is with you, trust the leading of the Holy Spirit. You're in my thoughts and prayers. I get shy because I don't want to sound glib.

But sometimes, we need to speak simple, true words in all their straight-up goodness. Entertain the thought that this is what David is attempting in the Song of the Bow, that he actually means what he says about Saul and Jonathan. Maybe the

song comes from a corner that lies beyond the political convolutions of his life. Maybe it's a word that can be savored as "sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb" (Ps. 19:10).