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"THE DEATH OF ANOINTED KINGS"

by Charles Dale Cannon

The purpose of this paper is to treat the death of two kings—Richard II and Saul—and the relationships of their successors—Henry IV and David—with the men responsible for the deaths of their predecessors. Killing a king or even participating in his death at the request of the king was considered a crime of such enormity because the “cease of majesty” by violence was an unspeakable affront to law and religion.

The importance of being a king inheres in the fact that a king assumes a position of leadership which may take many forms. His leadership may well be both spiritual and temporal.\(^1\) In the temporal realm he may be the chief judge, military leader, and the first magistrate of the realm. In the spiritual realm he may be a god.\(^2\) Though some kings are gods, not all are. If not a god, he may be a prophet or a priest, even if not the archpriest. Moreover, even when the ruler either in primitive or in modern times, has not combined religious duties with political office, “the credulous public have often treated him as a priest or a god.”\(^3\) A king may be said to rule by divine right without making a claim to personal divinity though divinity may be said to “hedge” him. A king may be styled “defender of the faith,” “supreme head,” or (for a queen) “supreme governor” of an established church.

At any rate, people of all sorts and conditions in all ages have attested to the fact that there is something extraordinary about a

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\(^1\) See A. S. Tritton, “King (Semitic),” in James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, where Saul is referred to as “judge, general, and priest,” VII, 725.

\(^2\) A. E. Crawley in *Religion and Ethics* comments on the concept of “divine king or human god” and finds two “psychological tendencies . . . in these elemental ideas about the divine king or human god: a veneration for authority and a belief in magic,” VII, 709.

\(^3\) *Ibid.*
king. Whether he be conceived as saint, shaman, magician, general, judge, or "God’s deputy," he has been set apart from other men.

Within the Judaeo-Christian tradition one feature of setting apart a king has been the anointing. The anointing of a king which consecrates him to his task seems to derive from the priest-like aspect of his office and the fact that Hebrew kings were anointed. Once a king had been anointed, set apart, and consecrated, there were those who held it sacrilege to lift a hand against the "Lord’s anointed," whatever the provocation. Even to consider rebelling against an anointed king was an unspeakable effrontery in the light of the fact that the heavenly bodies as well as all ranks in the Chain of Being observed proper rank, degree, and priority in keeping with a divine plan and order.

To be a spiritual leader, to rule by divine right even though not personally claiming divinity, gave a king another claim for obedience, for rebelling against God’s deputy would be sacrilege as well as treason. Though Lily Bess Campbell points out that the king was responsible to the "King of Kings," she adds that this "part of the theory of divine right [was] less popular with reigning monarchs"

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4Crawley writes that J. G. Frazer “has established by a long array of facts the theory that among primitive peoples it was the medicine man, the shaman, or public magician who laid the foundations, at least in part, of the kingly office”; "Beginning," according to Frazer, "as little more than a simple conjurer, the medicine man or magician tends to blossom out into a full-blown god and king in one,” ibid.

5Morris Jastrow in “Anointing (Semitic)” in Religion and Ethics said the act of anointing among the Hebrew people was “meant actually to symbolize the sanctity bound up with such objects and persons and was to be understood as the investiture with such sanctity,” I, 556.

6 A. S. Tritton, for example, does not believe there is a separate line of development for the anointing of a king and the anointing of a priest, Religion and Ethics, VII, 726; Morris Jastrow, noting the explicit references in the scriptures to the anointing of Saul, David, Solomon, Joash, and Jehoahaz, concludes that “the rite was a general one from the beginning of Kingship among the Hebrews,” Religion and Ethics, I, 556.

7 A. O. Lovejoy in The Great Chain of Being (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936) gives the fullest exposition of the concept of the great chain of being; see also Hardin Craig, The Enchanted Glass (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936) and E.M.W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1944); Ulysses in Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida (I, iii, 75ff.) speaks at some length on rank, order and degree, observing at one point that discord is a consequence of failing to observe proper rank and degree: “Take but degree away, untune that string;/ And, hark, what discord follows!”
than the part which insisted on the obedience which a subject owed his sovereign. The sovereign was understandably more likely to emphasize the fact that he was answerable to no one on earth than that he was responsible to anyone else—even to God.

According to the received political doctrine subjects might “under no circumstances rebel against the ruler, for he represents God, and to resist him is to resist God. If God is pleased, he will send a good ruler; if he wishes to try or to punish the people, he may give them a tyrant for a king.” Figgis lists the doctrine of passive obedience as one of the fundamental principles of the theory of the divine right of kings: “Non-resistance and passive obedience are enjoined of God. Under any circumstance resistance to a king is a sin and ensures damnation.”

Alfred Hart notes the fact that Shakespeare would have been “in his tenth year when the new homily on “Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion was read for the first time in Holy Trinity Church.” He notes, moreover, that the contents of the sermon “were calculated to impress the memory and mind of an imaginative boy. To forget it or its solemn teachings would be impossible. . . .”

As it appears in the Second Tome of Homilies (1577), the “Homilie agaynst disobedience and wylful rebellion” points out that obedience is due that sovereign, whether he is a good one or an evil one. David’s exemplary behavior towards King Saul in the face of extreme provocation from King Saul is cited as an instance of a more-than-ordinary subject’s correct behavior at the hands of a king who sought his death:

Kyng Saul . . . rewarded hym [David] not onely with great vnkyndnesse, but also sought his destruction and death by all meanes possible: so that David was faine to save his life, not by rebellion, nor any resistaunce, but by flight and hyding him selfe from the kings sight. Which

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9Ibid.
notwithstanding, when king Saul vpon a time came alone into the caue where David was so yt David myght easily haue slayne hym, yet would he neyther hurt him, himselfe, neyther suffer any of his men to lay handes vpon hym.¹²

Anointed majesty is conceived of as a closer relationship with God than people may have if they are not kings and have not been anointed. If the divinity that hedges a king does not spare his life, the taking of a king’s life is an especially odious deed. Even when a king’s death is desired by his successor, the person who kills the king can expect scant thanks if any for killing a king.

When Exton in Richard II decided to act on the wish of Bolingbroke and rid Bolingbroke of the “living fear,” the deposed Richard II, Exton may not have expected to be made “earl or duke” as Falstaff hoped when he falsely represented himself as killing Hotspur. It is highly likely, however, that he expected some reward and was no more prepared for the kind of reward he received from Bolingbroke, now Henry IV, than Falstaff was when he was curtly rejected by Hal when he was Henry V.

As a good soldier may be enjoined to interpret the wish or desire of his commanding officer as an order, so Exton interpreted the wish of the new king. When Exton repeated to a servant the words of the king—“Have I no friend will rid me of this living fear?”—the servant responded “These were his very words.” Both Exton and the servant agreed that the king looked at Exton in a wistful manner as if to say “I would thou wert the man/That would divorce this terror from my heart.” At this point Exton affirms that he is the king’s friend and “will rid his foe.”

Killing Richard II, the “skipping king,” was more difficult, however, than may have been anticipated. Richard may justly have been considered a man of thought rather than of action, a man who could use the rhetoric of majesty without being possessed of the virtue to stand to the rhetoric (“We were not born to sue but to command”), but in the final moments of his life Richard acquitted himself more like an Anglo-Saxon king proud of tracing his ancestry directly from the bellicose Woden rather than like a man who was but a scholar of

¹²The Second Tome of Homilies (1577), STC 3671.
kingship, not a warrior-king in his own right. Moreover, Richard’s language showed his resolution. Having killed one man, he said to Exton “Go thou and fill another room in Hell.” Mortally wounded by Exton, Richard tells him “That hand shall burn in never-quenching fire that staggers thus my person.”

Richard departed this life like a man, and it was after Richard had killed two men, disarming one man and killing him with his own weapon, that Exton struck Richard down. Having done so, Exton felt no exultation but was remorseful, saying Richard was As full of valor as of royal blood.
Both have I spilled—oh would the deed were good!
For now the Devil, that told me I did well,
Says that this deed is chronicled in Hell.13

Later Exton went into Henry IV’s presence bearing Richard’s coffin and said:

Great King, within this coffin I present
Thy buried fear. Herein all breathless lies
Richard of Bordeaux, by me hither brought.

Instead, however, of receiving thanks from the king, Exton heard the king say:

They love not poison that do poison need
Nor do I thee. Though I did wish him dead,
I hate the murderer, love him murdered.

Moreover the king told Exton “I thank thee not, for thou hast wrought/A deed of slander with thy fatal hand. . . .” When Exton sought to justify himself, urging that “From your own mouth, my lord, did I this deed,” Henry bluntly said “Though I did wish him dead, I hate the murderer. . . .”

Instead, then, of having the royal favor for the deed Exton had, according to the king, “the guilt of conscience,” not “my good word nor princely favor.” Henry bade Exton “with Cain go wander through

13Citation here and elsewhere to the text of Shakespeare is to G. B. Harrison’s Shakespeare: Major Plays and the Sonnets (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1948).
shades of night./And never show thy head by day or night." As for himself, Henry protested that his soul was "full of woe" and said that he planned to "make a voyage to the Holy Land" to expiate the crime.

There is a sense in which the relationship of Bolingbroke and Richard is analogous to that of David and Saul as set forth in the Old Testament in the Book of Samuel. Though Henry does not explicitly invoke the concept of the divine right of kings and does not mention the fact that killing an anointed king is a greater crime than killing anyone else, the play Richard II and King Richard himself have been explicit about anointed majesty. "The breath of worldly men cannot depose the deputy elected by the lord," asserted Richard, in the play which Dover Wilson has styled "that gorgeous dramatic essay on the divine right of kings." Though some theorists of the concept of the divine right of kings have questioned the necessity, permanence, and efficacy of the anointing, King Richard did not: "Not all the water in the rough rude sea/ Can wash the balm off from an anointed king." When, therefore, he told Exton, who had mortally wounded him, "That hand shall burn in never-quenching fire which stagers thus my person," he may well have had in mind the extra burden of guilt that afflicts a regicide.

When Henry said, "They love not poison that do poison need," when he desires the death but does not commend the murderer, he is in a situation similar to that of David and Saul as found in the Book of Samuel.

When David once had an opportunity to kill Saul, he did not do so even though "men of David" urged him on against Saul. The men who urged David to kill Saul considered the opportunity provided by circumstances to be a fulfillment of prophecy, for God had said "Beholde, I wil deliuer thine enemie into thine hand, and thou shalt do to him as it shal seme good to thee" (I Samuel 24:5).

David did not kill Saul but "arose and cut of the lappe of Sauls garment priuely." Feeling remorseful later, however, even for having done this, he said

15Citation here and elsewhere to the Book of Samuel is to the Geneva Bible, STC 2093.
The Lord kepe me from doing that thing vnto my master the Lords Anointed, to lay mine hand vpon him: for he is the Anointed of the Lord.

(I Samuel 24:7)

David's resolution not to lay a hand on the Lord's anointed was confirmed later when a man of the Amalekites came to David from the camp of Saul with word that Saul was dead. When David asked about the death of Saul, the man told how he had come upon Saul who was found leaning on a spear. Saul bade the man "I pray thee, come vpon me, and sloye me: for anguish is come vpon me, because my life is yet whole in me." Complying with the king's request, the man said:

I came vpon him, and slewe him, & because I was sure that he colde not live after that he had fallen, I toke the crowne that was vpon his head, and the bracelet that was on his arme, and broght the hither vnto my lord.

(II Samuel I:9-10)

At this point the Amalekite must have been as hopeful as Exton was when he brought the coffin containing the dead King Richard into the presence of Henry. Instead of thanking the Amalekite, David questioned him: "How wast thou not afraied, to put forthe thine hand to destroy the Anointed of the Lord?" (II Samuel 1:14)

Instead of rewarding him, David, having questioned him, forthwith called one of his yong me, & said, Go nere, and fall vpo him. And he smote him that he dyed. The said David vnto him, Thy blood be vpon thine owne head., for thine owne mouth hathe testified against thee, saying, I haue slaine the Lords Anointed.

Then Dauid mourned with this lamentation ouer Saul, and ouer Ionathan his sonne...

(II Samuel 1:15-17).

A comparison of the death of the two kings reveals both parallels and discrepancies. First both men were kings and (in terms of this study) anointed majesty. In both instances a successor was not only readily available but eager to assume the kingship. In Richard's case Bolingbroke was already King Henry IV, but the deposed King Richard II was yet alive constituting the "living fear" which dis-
turbed King Henry IV. In both instances the successor (whether successor in fact or successor-presumptive) had reason to wish the death of the king. Henry IV uttered his wish and Exton acted on it. David clipped a piece from Saul's robe, at least a symbolic act of hostility, notwithstanding the fact that he later repented of the act.

In both instances there is expressed or implied the idea that killing a king or participating in the death of anointed majesty was a heinous act deserving no thanks but occasioning remorse and mourning. In both instances the man who was the efficient cause of the death expected a reward from the dead king's successor. In Richard II, Exton, accompanying the coffin of Richard II, told Henry he presented to him "thy buried fear," that "Herein all breathless lies/ The mightiest of thy enemies. . . . " In Samuel, the Amalekite came into the presence of David and explained the circumstances of Saul's death, his assistance in the death of the dying Saul. Moreover, the Amalekite told how he took "the crown . . . and the bracelet" from the dead king "and brought them hither to my lord." Having every reason to expect a reward, the man nevertheless went unrewarded. Instead of breaking into thanksgiving at the news David "toke holde on his clothes, & rent them, and likewise all the men that were with him. And they mourned and wept, and fasted vntil euen, for Saul . . . ." (II Samuel 1:11-12).

In both instances the efficient cause of the death not only went unrewarded but was punished—Exton with scorn and banishment, and the Amalekite by death at the bidding of the man from whom he had reason to expect thanks and a reward, not a sentence of death. Finally, in both instances there was lamentation by the successor-king. Killing a king was a deed of such impiousness that though Henry and David may have desired the consequences of the death of Richard and Saul, they could neither reward the efficient causes nor openly rejoice over the death of their predecessor. The future King David "mourned with this lamentation ouer Saul. . . . " Henry IV, protesting that "my soul is full of woe" enjoined others to "Come mourn with me for that I do lament,/ And put on sullen black incontinent" (V. vi. 47-48).

Making clear his own personal burden of guilt he said:

I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land
To wash this blood off from my guilty hand.
March sadly after, grace my mournings here
In weeping after this untimely bier.

(V. vi. 49-52)