THE LEGAL BACKGROUND TO THE RESTORATION OF MICHAL TO DAVID

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At the height of a long and bitter war between the House of Saul and the House of David (2 Sam. ii 12 — iii 1) a singular episode claims the attention of the biblical narrative:

Then David sent messengers to Ish-bosheth Saul’s son, saying, “Give me my wife Michal, whom I betrothed at the price of a hundred foreskins of the Philistines”. And Ish-bosheth sent and took her from her husband Paltiel the son of Laish. But her husband went with her, weeping after her all the way to Bahurim. Then Abner said to him, “Go, return”; and he returned (2 Sam. iii 14-16).

By way of a royal command Eshbaal 1) takes Michal, Saul’s daughter, from her husband Paltiel the son of Laish and gives her to David, in accordance with the latter’s demand.

This narrative passage gives rise to three fundamental questions:

A. Why does Eshbaal agree to hand over Michal, who is under his authority, to his most dangerous adversary, David?

The first question has a clearly political character. After the defeat at Gilboa, with the death of Saul and his sons, Israel was divided into two units. The first, “Israel”, included most of the tribes of Israel and was under the rule of Eshbaal, the only remaining son of Saul (2 Sam. ii 8-10). The second unit, “Judah”, consisting of the tribe of Judah and tribal elements in the South, was under the leadership of David, who was crowned at Hebron (2 Sam. ii 2-7, 11). This political rift between “Israel” and “Judah” was accompanied by a civil war, in which superiority lay with David’s forces (2 Sam. iii 1) 2).

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1) Eshbaal, the correct form, is preserved only in 1 Chr. viii 33, ix 39. Ish-bosheth is a scribal alteration. See S. Loewenstein, “Eshbaal”, Encyclopaedia Biblica 1 (Jerusalem, 1955), pp. 749-50 (Hebrew); E. Lipiński, “*šbšl and *šbw, and parallel personal names”, OLP 5 (1974), pp. 5-13.

David's motives for demanding the restoration of Michal are obvious, and fit in well with his aim of obtaining complete control over Israel. His marriage to a daughter of Saul king of Israel would bestow legitimacy upon his rule, and would act as a bridge between the two hostile factions.

There can be no doubt that all this was not lost on Eshbaal, who was well aware of the advantages to be gained from this marriage for an adversary who was going from strength to strength, and of the danger it heralded for his tottering rule. This was especially so since Eshbaal actually had no legal right to the throne, in view of the fact that in Israel the dynastic principle had not yet been established as a part of the institution of kingship 3). Indeed, his ascent to the throne was unaccompanied by any act of sanctification (Noth, p. 169; E. tr., p. 183). One would therefore expect that he would strenuously resist any such union and spare no effort to frustrate the execution of an act so pregnant with danger not only for his kingdom but perhaps for his very life. It is thus all the more astonishing that he does not oppose the handing over of the king's daughter to David, and that he himself orders that David's request be complied with and sees to its execution 4).

B. How are Michal's marriage first to David and then to Paltiel and her remarriage to David to be explained?

The second question is on the plane of social ethics. Twice Michal is given to a different man, in the lifetime of her husband, and on both occasions by the legal authority, the king. On the first occasion Michal, as David's wife, is given to Paltiel the son of Laish by King Saul (1 Sam. xxv 44). On the second occasion Michal, as the wife of Paltiel the son of Laish, is given in his lifetime to David, at the command of Eshbaal king of Israel. This repeated offence against one of the sacred principles of society is in need of explanation. A

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4) The response of Eshbaal to Abner in the matter of Saul's concubine (2 Sam. iii 6-8) demonstrates his great sensitivity to the stability of his kingdom and to anything that could endanger it.