

***The Gibeonite Revenge of 2 Sam 21:1–14:
Another Example of David’s Darker Side
or a Picture of a Shrewd Monarch?***¹

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Second Samuel 21:1–14 records the Gibeonites’ ritualistic execution of the seven sons of Rizpah and Merab. Many scholars insist that this account illustrates David’s brutality in his securing of the throne from the Saulides. Furthermore, chapters 21–24 appear to be chronologically disruptive to the Succession Narratives of 1 Sam 16–1 Kgs 2 with no real purpose other than to offer a few closing remarks on David’s kingship. However, David’s actions in 2 Sam 21:1–14 must be understood not so much as acts of wanton brutality and carpe diem but rather as the actions of a wronged man at the hands of Saul. What is more, David’s actions must not only be appreciated in light of ANE treaty-curses and their reversal, but also in light of the motifs of “settling scores” and of throne preparation and transition. In keeping with this latter motif, 2 Sam 21:1–14 fits thematically within the appendix of 2 Sam 21–24 and the greater rhetorical purposes of the compiler of 2 Sam 21–1 Kgs 2:12. The picture that emerges from this material is one of a shrewd monarch righting past wrongs and preparing his kingdom for his successor.

KEYWORDS: *Gibeonites; Second Samuel 21:1–14; Curse reversal; Succession Narratives; Merab*

INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship has shown a renewed interest in the Deuteronomistic

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Atlanta, Georgia in November, 2010.

Historian's presentation of David in the so-called "Succession Narratives" of 1 Sam 16–1 Kgs 2:12.² Scholars have scrutinized the manner in which the original author/compiler³ of this material catalogued not only David's struggles with Saul, but also David's rise to power and the transition of his throne to Solomon. Leo Perdue argues that throughout these events, "the narrator's presentation of David is intentionally ambiguous so that two very different interpretations of David may emerge, depending on the reader's own assessment of the motives resting behind the king's actions and speech."⁴ Some even posit that by a "straightforward" reading of the text, (which I might add is most often done by relying heavily on reading "between the lines")⁵ one

2. David L. Petersen astutely notes that the presentation of David in the Hebrew Bible is not so much a picture as it is a "portrait" ("Portraits of David: Canonical and Otherwise," *Int* 40.2 [1986]: 130).

3. For the purpose of my argument I use these terms interchangeably even though I am aware of the nuances of each.

4. Leo G. Perdue, "Is There Anyone Left of the House of Saul . . . ? Ambiguity and the Characterization of David in the Succession Narrative," *JSOT* 30 (1984): 71. Perdue goes on to note that the author is not "indifferent to the two different ways his character may be read. Rather, the storyteller's design is to demonstrate the complexity of David" (70).

5. I am a firm believer that it is the biblical text itself, along with what we know of the historical peculiarities of this period, which must serve as the final source of "proof" for any conclusion relating to David and his biography. So too the conclusion of P. Kyle McCarter, "The Historical David," *Int* 40.2 (1986): 117, and Steven L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 23. Note, however, that the shift in scholarship as to whether the Succession Narratives are historical or fiction can be seen in the contrasting views of scholars from an earlier time period and those of more recent times. Earlier scholars were more likely to hold to their historicity e.g., Leonhard Rost, *Die Überlieferung von der Thronnachfolge Davids* (BWANT 3/6; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1926 in English cf. idem., *The Succession to the Throne of David* [trans. Michael D. Rutter and David M. Gunn; Great Britain: Almond, 1982]) and Gerhard von Rad, "The Beginnings of Historical Writing in Ancient Israel," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (trans. E. W. Trueman Dicken; London: Oliver and Boyd, 1966), 166–204 esp. 176–204, while more recently, scholars have insisted they smack of fiction. On this later stance, see Ernst Würthwein, *Die Erzählung von der Thronfolge Davids—theologische oder politische Geschichtsschreibung?* (Theologische Studien 115; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974) and F. Langlamet, "Pour ou contre Salomon? La rédaction prosalomonienne de I Rois I–II," *RB* 83 (1976): 321–79, 481–528. In these latter two cases they see this portion of the text as originally anti-Solomonic and Davidic, which was redacted for the sole purpose of making it pro-Solomonic and pro-Davidic. Also in this later camp scholars such as Charles Conroy, *Absalom Absalom!* (AnBib 81; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1978) and Harry Hagan, "Deception as Motif and Theme in 2 Sam 9–20; 1 Kgs 1–2," *Bib* 60 (1979): 301–26 insist that the text is "literary fiction" and therefore not to be assigned the appellation, "history."

can assuredly determine that David was no more than a tyrant guilty of excessive brutality, murdering his way to the throne of Israel.⁶ At the other end of the spectrum, some scholars adopt a more “naïve” perspective of the text by stressing David’s humility and passivity in gaining the throne of Israel, relying only on the blessing and aid of Yahweh.⁷ In light of these two polar-opposite positions, David Bosworth appears correct when he avers that neither the “naïve” nor the “straightforward” readings of the narrative do justice to the text.⁸ Bosworth continues, “Although the pious tradition of David the upright hero is a simplistic idea in need of revision, the claim that David was a terrorist or a tyrant after the pattern of Joseph Stalin seems to be another simplistic idea.”⁹ Therefore, perhaps a mediating approach is the most appropriate place to initiate our quest for the “historical” David.¹⁰

This middle-of-the-road perspective evolves from the simple reality that even the most conservative of scholars have to admit that the material in this portion of Samuel and Kings does appear in tension at times. For example, we see David assuring Saul—under oath mind you—that he will not destroy Saul’s offspring when he ascends the throne (cf. 1 Sam 24:21–22) yet he appears to go ahead and do just that

6. For example, Baruch Halpern, *David’s Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001). Halpern goes so far as to call David a “serial killer” (73). Cf. also McKenzie, *King David*, 111–27 (who calls David an “assassin”); and Niels Peter Lemche, “David’s Rise,” *JSOT* 10 (1978): 2–25. Of no surprise is the similar perspective adopted by commentators in the March 16, 2009 airing of “David: Giant Slayer” on A&E History Channel’s *Battles BC*. Walter Brueggemann suggests the closing chapters of 2 Sam (esp. 2 Sam 21:1–14) are meant to offer an ironic counter perspective of a perfect David (*First and Second Samuel* [Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990], 373). For a more balanced approach, see McCarter, “The Historical David,” 117–29.

7. An example of this approach is F. W. Krummacker, *David: King of Israel* (trans. M. G. Easton; Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1994), esp. 362–63.

8. David A. Bosworth, “Evaluating King David: Old Problems and Recent Scholarship,” *CBQ* 68.2 (2006): 191.

9. *Ibid.*, 195.

10. K. L. Noll concludes that “David is a well-rounded character [. . .] David is good and evil, hot and cold, lovable and worthy of admiration, frightening in his disregard for the welfare of others” (*The Faces of David* [JSOTSup 242; Sheffield: Sheffield, 1997], 63). See also Peter Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative* (SBL Semeia Studies; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 2.

in the Gibeonite affair in 2 Sam 21:1–14.¹¹ Or what are we to make of David's words of assurance to Shimei in 2 Sam 19:23 and then his obvious change of heart when instructing Solomon as David lay on his deathbed (cf. 1 Kgs 2:8–9)? These are just two of numerous examples that have been put forward to advocate for David's apparent brutality, deceptiveness, or change of heart. Some have even marshaled twenty-first-century psychoanalytical theory to try to explain David's actions. They postulate that these apparent radical swings in behavior were due in part to some form of mental psychosis that David experienced as he aged.¹² However, such assertions will not be entertained here but instead we will look at more conventional ancient Near Eastern solutions and possible literary conventions of the day employed by the author.

In light of this caveat, in this paper I will focus specifically on the "Gibeonite Revenge" found in 2 Sam 21:1–14 (the ideal pericope to highlight David's apparent brutality) and its rhetorical function within the appendix of 2 Sam (i.e., 2 Sam 21–24) and the larger epilogue of the Succession Narratives found in 2 Sam 21–1 Kgs 2.¹³ I will do this in an attempt to ascertain what David's thought process may have been when making life and death decisions. However, a simple analysis of 2 Sam 21:1–14 is not complete without also answering the question of why the compiler used this disturbing account to introduce the appendix of 2 Sam.¹⁴ After handling these concerns, this study will show that David's

11. So too Marti J. Steussy, *David: Biblical Portraits of Power* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 67. For a text-critical analysis of this pericope, see Simeon Chavel, "Compositry and Creativity in 2 Samuel 21:1–14," *JBL* 122 (2003): 23–52.

12. Cf. H. Hirsch Cohen, "David and Bathsheba," *JBR* 33 (1965): 142–48. Here Cohen argues that David's actions in the Bathsheba affair stemmed from a mid-life crisis of sorts while also being adversely affected by the hot, dry weather of the region. Pam and Jon Ruthven suggest that David is suffering from MDD (Major Depressive Disorder) throughout his later years of kingship ("The Feckless Later Reign of King David: A Case of Major Depressive Disorder," *JPCC* 55 [2001]: 425–32). Henry P. Laughlin suggests that David suffered from "suppression or repression of self-criticism and projection" ("King David's Anger," *JPCC* 8.3 [1954]: 148). Cf. also Hans-Jürgen Dallmeyer and Walter Dietrich, *David—ein Königsweg: Psychoanalytisch-theologischer Dialog* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), esp. 165–68.

13. Hans J. Stoebe argues for the unity of the appendix at the hand of one editor/author (*Das zweite Buch Samuelis* [KAT: Gütersloh: Mohn, 1994], 36–38; as cited by Chavel, "Compositry and Creativity," 23 n. 2).

14. I am fully aware of the argued chiasmic structure/palistrope present in 2 Sam 21–24. Cf. for example Julius Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bucher des Alten Testaments* (3d ed.; Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1899), 260–63

oft-harangued brutal actions in 2 Sam 21:1–14 are best explained by a contextual appeal to both the past wrongs suffered by David at the hands of Saul and David's implementation of ANE curse-reversal protocol; as well as that, while the account of 2 Sam 21:1–14 may appear somewhat out of place both contextually and chronologically,¹⁵ it does in fact give us a further window into the rhetorical techniques and purposes of the compiler. In this vein, the compiler intentionally uses the Gibeonite event as an introduction to the epilogue and to initiate the motif of throne preparations and transition for the new king, Solomon. The compiler does this by alerting the reader to eight strategic facets that show that the transition between David and Solomon is ready to commence:

1. The threat from past curses on the land (i.e., famine) is eliminated (21:1–14).
2. David's age has restricted him in battle, thus a new king is needed (21:15–17).
3. The threat of Philistine giants is removed from the land (21:18–22).
4. David is at peace with his God (22:1–51).
5. In typical Deuteronomistic style, David's final words have been spoken (23:1–7).
6. David's loyal bodyguard is in place ready to aid the new king (23:8–39).
7. Yahweh is at peace with the nation for past sins (24:1–25).
8. The future site for the temple has been identified (24:18).

esp. 260–61; Joyce Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel* (TOTC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 282–83; P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel* (AB 9; New York Doubleday, 1984), 18; A. A. Anderson *2 Samuel* (WBC 11; Dallas, TX: Word, 1989), 248. While a chiasmic structure may be present, few if any attempt to explain what overall purpose it serves other than to record concluding comments about David's life. Therefore, my concern here will be the theological/rhetorical reason why the material is ordered as such. An example of the oft-cited chiasmic structure is that offered by Anderson:

- A. Offense of Saul and its expiation (21:1–14)
- B. Lists of heroes and their exploits (21:15–22)
- C. David's praise of Yahweh (22:1–51)
- C' Yahweh's oracle to David (23:1–7)
- B' Lists of heroes and their exploits (23:8–39)
- A' Offense of David and its expiation (24:1–25)

15. Most scholars agree that this passage is not chronologically linked to its surrounding material and most likely is to be placed chronologically between 2 Sam 8 and 9 (see more below). Cf. R. A. Carlson, *David, the Chosen King: A Traditio-Historical Approach to the Second Book of Samuel* (trans. Eric J. Sharpe and Stanley Rudman; Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri AB, 1964), 178–79.

Thus the appendix to 2 Sam serves two functions: 1) to explain David's actions (sometimes brutal), and 2) to prepare the reader for Solomon's rule.

THE GIBEONITE REVENGE: 2 SAM 21:1–14

In 2 Sam 21:1–14 we find that Israel is suffering a famine brought upon the land by a curse directly connected to the unrecorded¹⁶ crimes which Saul perpetrated against Gibeon.¹⁷ According to Josh 9:3–27, Gibeon became a covenanted ally of Israel due to Joshua's hasty covenant ceremony and vows made to them. Due to this alliance, David is constrained to honor the Gibeonites' request for seven sons of Saul to be hung before the Lord in order to end the famine.

Scholars have long puzzled over the possible reasons for David's compliance to the Gibeonites' request. For example, were David's motives cultic or politically motivated? Kapelrud and Cazelles insist that David was basically syncretistic by allowing the Gibeonites' Canaanite sacrificial rituals to inform his decision—a decision that would hopefully not only end the famine but also rid David of rivals to the throne.¹⁸ On the other hand, Fensham and Malamat insist that David was justified in his decision on covenantal grounds and was acting within the ANE

16. Brueggemann suggests that this lack of evidence lends credence to the belief that the entire Gibeonite episode is a "Davidic fabrication" in order to justify the king's harsh treatment of the Saulides (*First and Second Samuel*, 336–37). Rashi suggests that seven Gibeonites were killed by Saul when he massacred the priests at Nob (cf. 1 Sam 22): two wood cutters, two drawers of water, an attendant, a carrier, and a scribe. Cf. Rashi's commentary on 2 Sam 21. The Babylonian Talmud suggests that in killing the inhabitants of Nob, Saul actually killed the Gibeonites because the priests supplied them with water and food. Cf. *Yebamoth* 78b.

17. Modern-day *El-Jib*.

18. Arvid S. Kapelrud, "King David and the Sons of Saul," in *La Regalità Sacra/The Sacral Kingship: Contributions to the Central Theme of the VIIIth International Congress for the History of Religions (Rome, April 1955)* (Leiden: Brill, 1959), 294–301 or in German, "König David und die Söhne des Saul," *ZAW* 67 (1955): 198–205; idem, "King and Fertility: A Discussion of II Sam 21:1–14," in *Interpretationes Ad Vetus Testamentum Pertinentes Sigmund Mowinckel Septuagenario Missae* (Norway, Fabritius & Søner, 1955), 113–22. Henri Cazelles, "David's Monarchy and the Gibeonite Claim (2 Sam xxi, 1–14)," *PEQ* 87 (1955): 165–75 follows Kapelrud's ritualistic perspective in the death of the Saulides in 2 Sam 21. Cazelles avers that David is acquiescing to the Canaanite expiation rituals rooted in Baal and Mot cultic texts of fertility. He concludes that David is willing to amalgamate Israelite tradition with Canaanite practices. See also comments by Carlson, *David, the Chosen King*, 177, 218–22.

guidelines for covenant violation and curse reversal.¹⁹ Because Saul had broken the covenant with the Gibeonites, blood vengeance was required. Even though Saul was dead, based upon ANE thinking, his essence/identity still lived on through his offspring and thus they could serve in proxy.²⁰

On these two perspectives McCarter concludes that the narrator wants one to believe the latter but this may still not rule out the former choice, namely David was acquiescing from selfish motives.²¹ Now while McCarter's perspective is possible, it is unlikely that David was merely acquiescing to the Gibeonites' request for purely selfish motives—as an ANE monarch he had to do something to ameliorate the effects of the famine. Indeed, Fensham, Malamat, Walton, Matthews and others have clearly shown the connections between ANE curse reversal precedents and David's actions.²² Furthermore, “sacrificial” acts in the

19. Frank C. Fensham, “The Treaty between Israel and the Gibeonites,” *BA* 27 (1964): 96–100 and Abraham Malamat, “Doctrines of Causality in Biblical and Hittite Historiography: A Parallel,” *VT* 5 (1955): 1–12.

20. So Herbert C. Brichto, “Kin, Cult, Land, Afterlife: A Biblical Complex,” *HUCA* 44 (1973): 36–37; Henry W. Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (Berlin: Topelmann, 1936; repr., Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1967), 3–4; Francesca Stavrakopoulou, “Ezekiel's Use and Abuse of Corpses” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the SBL, Boston, MA, 24 November 2008), 1–16; Brian Peterson, *Ezekiel in Context: Ezekiel's Message Understood in its Historical Context of Covenant Curses and Ancient Near Eastern Mythological Motifs* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series 182; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 232–35.

21. McCarter, *II Samuel*, 445; idem, “‘Plots, True or False’: The Succession Narrative as Court Apologetic,” *Int* 35 (1981): 355–67, here 363. In this latter article McCarter avers that David acted out of “executive duty” and not as a means of securing his position.

22. Cf. Fensham, “The Treaty between Israel and the Gibeonites,” 96–100; Malamat, *Doctrines of Causality*,” 1–12. Malamat contends that there are parallels between the Hittite account of Murshili's attempt to adduce the cause of a twenty-year plague in Hatti and the inquiry of David concerning the three-year famine in Israel. Similar to the Gibeonite claim, Murshili concludes that the plague is due to his father's (i.e., Shuppiliuma c. 1375–1340 B.C.E.) breaking of a treaty with Egypt which was sworn to in the name of the Hatti storm god. John Walton, Victor Matthews, and Mark Chavalas point out that this type of inquiry to the gods was a common occurrence in the ANE (*The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000], 350). They note both the above Hittite text and other Babylonian parallels as examples, especially the Weidner Chronicle. For the Hittite example, see “Plague Prayers of Mursilis,” translated by Albrecht Goetze (*ANET*, 394–96 esp. 395). For a Babylonian example, see “Nabonidus and His God,” translated by A. Leo Oppenheim (*ANET*, 562–63 esp. 562). On curse reversals, see Herbert M. Wolf, “The Transcendent Nature of Covenant Curse Reversals” in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of*

context of covenant breach and its curses pepper not only ANE literature, but also the Hebrew Bible itself (e.g., Achan in Josh 6; Zedekiah in Ezek 17:15–16 cf. also Isa 24, etc.).²³ Therefore, David’s compliance with the Gibeonites’ request is a moot point in light of ANE treaty and curse-reversal protocol.

What is more illuminating of David’s ultimate goal and intentions is to look at the particular individuals (i.e., the Saulides) whom he chose to fulfill the request.²⁴ It is here that one could agree with McCarter that David may have been operating from selfish motives. It goes without saying that because ANE leaders expected vassals and

Roland K. Harrison (eds. R. K. Harrison and Avraham Gileadi; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 319–25.

23. Cf. Robert Polzin, “*HWQY*’ and Covenantal Institutions in Early Israel,” *HTR* 62.2 (1969): 227–40. Polzin (231) defines the Hebrew word *hwqy*’ as “some kind of public ritual act of execution plausibly understood as a punishment for breach of covenant.” He also notes the close parallels of 2 Sam 21:1–14 and in the Baal Peor incident of Num 25:4. Polzin concludes that 2 Sam 21:1–14 is indeed a picture of a broken treaty where the curses are being enforced, viz., execution and dismemberment—a reality commonly included in Western Semitic treaties of this period. For the practice of exposing corpses as a treaty or covenant curse, see for example, “Vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon,” translated by Erica Reiner (*ANET*, 538 line 425). For a number of examples from both the Hebrew Bible and ANE, see Peterson, *Ezekiel in Context*, 235–47. For ANE iconographic images depicting exposure of corpses, see Philips Long, “1 and 2 Samuel” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (ed. John Walton; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2009), 2:475. Note also that the Assyrians were known for their brutality and “sacrificing” of those who broke covenant with them. Cf. for example, “Shalmaneser III (858–824): The Fight against the Aramean Coalition: (b) Annalistic Reports,” translated by A. Leo Oppenheim (*ANET*, 277, 279) and notations by Kirk A. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC I (1114–859 BC)* (RIMA 2; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 17 col iii lines 25–27a. See also Grayson, RIMA 2, 20 col iv lines 18–21; col iv lines 89–94; and page 14 col i lines 75–82 which deal with similar terminology during the reign of Tiglath Pileser I. The latter text tells of Tiglath-pileser I’s bloody conquest of the kings of Alzu. See also *ibid.*, 14–15 col ii lines 12–15; 18 col iii lines 53–55; 199 lines 85–93 (the latter text dealing with Ashurnasirpal II). For a discussion on the mutilation of corpses in the ANE, see Seth Richardson, “Death and Dismemberment in Mesopotamia: Discorporation between the Body and Body Politic,” in *Performing Death: Social Analyses of Funerary Traditions in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean* (ed. Nicola Laneri; Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2007), 189–208, esp. 196–200; Zainab Bahrani, *Rituals of War: The Body and Violence in Mesopotamia* (New York: Zone, 2008); and T. M. Lemos, “Shame and Mutilation of Enemies in the Hebrew Bible,” *JBL* 125 (2006): 225–41.

24. See *Mishnat R. El.*, 166 lines 7–10 where it suggests that the Saulides who were chosen were actually complicit in the atrocities on the Gibeonites (as cited by Chavel, “Compositry and Creativity,” 52 n. 86). According to Rabbi Huna, David chose those to be sacrificed by bringing “. . . all of them past the ark. Any whom the ark held on to was assigned [sic] to death, and any whom the ark did not hold on to was assigned to life.” Cf. *Yebamoth* 79A.

equals to keep treaties and promises one should not expect any less of David's expectations from those around him. Indeed, contextually, this has a direct bearing on David's sentencing to death the seven descendants of Saul. There can be no doubt that the narrator wants the reader to believe that David's motive is one of rectifying a broken treaty but what he leaves for the reader to ascertain is the criteria by which David chose the particular descendants of Saul. It is this aspect of the account that I feel scholars have long overlooked. The key verse in our discussion is 2 Sam 21:8. The text reads,

ויקח המלך את־שני בני רצפה בת־איה אשר ילדה לשאול את־ארמני ואת־מפבשת ואת־חמשת בני מרב בת־שאול אשר ילדה לעדריאל בן־ברזלי המחלתי

“So the king took the two sons of Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth, and five sons of *Merab*, the daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel, the son of Barzillai the Meholathite.” (italics mine)

As can be seen from this reading I have opted to identify Saul's daughter as *Merab* and not *Michal* as preferred by the MT. The ancient textual witnesses are split in their reading of either Michal or Merab in this particular verse.²⁵ The classic argument for reading Michal instead of Merab comes from J. J. Glüch.²⁶ He suggests that Michal is the correct reading instead of Merab and that the scribe was writing from memory

25. The textual issues of 2 Sam 21:1–14 have been debated elsewhere and need not be rehearsed in detail here. For a full discussion of the textual variants in verse 8, see McCarter, *II Samuel*, 439. The main textual issue of verse 8 is the interchange of the names Merab (מרב) and Michal (מִיכָל). In two medieval Hebrew manuscripts, the LXXL, the Syriac, and the Targums we find “Merab” whereas the MT and LXXB opt for “Michal.” No less than four explanations have been offered to account for the discrepancy. First, the fact that the father of the five sons of the woman in question is said to be Adriel the Meholathite seems to be telling in light of 1 Sam 18:19 where Merab is named as his wife, thus the alternate reading of Merab is preferable. Second, in the Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 19b:9–26 the rabbis discuss this verse with Rabbi Joshua suggesting that Michal raised the children of Merab after her death thus adopting them in the same way Naomi adopted Ruth's son, Obed (cf. Ruth 4:16–17). For further discussion on the rabbinic interpretation of this text, see Shulamit Valler, “King David and ‘His’ Women: Biblical Stories and Talmudic Discussions,” in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 131–34. Third, some posit that Michal is in fact the correct reading. Cf. J.J. Glüch, “Merab and Michal,” *ZAW* 77 (1965): 72–81. Fourth, Merab's name was actually “Michal-Merab.” Cf. Krummacher, *David: King of Israel*, 361.

26. Some scholars sidestep the whole issue by just listing the deceased as two sons and five grandsons of Saul without making reference to which daughter of Saul is in question, e.g., McKenzie, *King David*, 136.

and had confused Michal's former husband with Merab's. However, it seems unlikely that the scribe would write out the entire name and family associations of Adriel and then assign Michal as his wife. It seems more likely that the scribe mistakenly added Michal instead of Merab.²⁷ Nevertheless, Glüch propounds that David chose the sons of Michal for execution in order to thwart any attempt by the Saulides to return to the throne.²⁸ This hardly seems a fitting response in light of David's desire to have Michal returned to him after the civil war of 2 Sam 2–3 (cf. esp. 2 Sam 3:14–16). He would have been fully aware that Michal had children by her former marriage (if in fact Glüch is correct) and that they could be a threat to him. Thus, why would he opt to bring them closer as contenders for the throne through some form of a remarriage with Michal? Glüch's logic is not clear in this case. Moreover, as witnessed by the choice of NASB, NIV, ESV, NLT, NRS and TNK translators, most scholars now acknowledge that the correct reading is Merab. It is from this consensus that I will move forward with Merab as opposed to Michal as the correct reading.²⁹ My arguments below will further vindicate this choice.

DAVID'S CHOICE OF SAULIDES

We can separate David's choice of Saulides into two categories: 1) the two sons of Rizpah and 2) the five sons of Merab. Why he chose these two women's sons may be more telling than what at first meets the eye. In choosing the five sons of Merab, David may have focused more on the righting of past wrongs—a common theme highlighted at the end of David's life (we will develop this further below), while Rizpah's sons may have been a convenient way to meet the Gibeonites' request while still keeping his vow to Saul (cf. 1 Sam 24:22).

27. Another possibility is that the three letters of Merab and the four letters of Michal (both starting with a *mem*) somehow became corrupted due to a scribal error.

28. Glüch, "Merab and Michal," 81.

29. For example cf. Robert Pinsky, *The Life of David* (New York: Random House, 2005), 94; McCarter, *II Samuel*, 439; Halpern, *David's Secret Demons*, 84, 314, (who follows McCarter's conclusions); C. F. Keil, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I and 2 Samuel* (trans. James Martin; Edinburgh: T & T Clark; 1866–91; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 678; Ronald F. Youngblood, *I & 2 Samuel* (EBC 3; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 1057; Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 247; Peter R. Ackroyd, *The Second Book of Samuel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 194, 198; and Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel* (4th ed.; trans. J. S. Bowden; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 380.

Rizpah's Sons

David may have been using a technicality in succession rights when he chose the two sons of Rizpah, a concubine of Saul. Choosing the children of a concubine would have allowed David to keep his earlier vow to Saul—namely that David would not cut off his offspring who could succeed Saul to the throne (cf. 1 Sam 24:22). In 1 Sam 24 the context leads one to believe that descendants who had a right to the throne is what is in view when David made his vow to Saul.³⁰ What is more, the Chronicler's failure to mention Rizpah's children as "sons" of Saul (cf. 1 Chr 8:33; 9:39) seems to be in keeping with the view that the sons of a concubine were not viewed as full "sons" who could inherit (cf. also Judg 11:1–2). In this vein, even in Ugaritic literature rarely would a concubine's child be allowed to ascend to the throne ahead of a full wife's children.³¹ We see a perfect example of this in Judg 9 when Abimelech usurps the kingship of Israel by killing all of Gideon's full sons.³² Also, note how Jephthah is mistreated by his brothers in Judg 11 because he is not a full son.³³ It was only a military crisis and his half brothers' fear of the Ammonites which allowed Jephthah to become an acceptable leader. Both of these accounts fall within the requisite time period of the early monarchy and set a biblical precedent for our theory.³⁴ Moreover, are we to believe that Saul's sons Jonathan, Abinadab, Malchishua, and Ishbosheth did not have sons before they died?³⁵ We

30. See also a similar vow made by David to Jonathan in the context of David's assured future rise to the throne (1 Sam 20:13–16). The killing of contenders to the throne when a dynasty changed hands or a new king came to the throne is present throughout the Hebrew Bible. E.g., Abimelech's killing of his brothers (Judg 9:5); Absalom's attempted destruction of David (2 Sam 15–18); Bathsheba's fear of Adonijah (2 Kgs 1:11–12); Zimri's killing of Baasha and his family (1 Kgs 16:11); Jehu's extermination of Ahab's family (2 Kgs 9–10); and Athaliah with the Judean royal line (2 Kgs 11:1).

31. Walton, et al., *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 365. And contra Chavel, who suggests Rizpah's children were heirs apparent to Saul's throne ("Compositry and Creativity," 43).

32. The Hebrew term used in Judg 9:18 is אַמָּה ("concubine" or "female slave") and also appears in Exod 21:20, 26, 27 in the context of the proper treatment of slaves. Similarly, the LXX uses the word παιδίσκαης ("bondwoman") in 9:18.

33. The phrase used here is בן־אִשָּׁה זוֹנָה ("son of a woman of harlotry").

34. This would be within one to two hundred years of David's life depending on one's dating of the judges' period (i.e., ca. 175 years vs. 300 years).

35. While this may be seen as an argument from silence, it seems impractical not to draw such a conclusion, especially in light of their royal status as Saul's sons. So too Cazelles,

know for certain that Mephibosheth was a son of Jonathan and would have been in line to the throne as the son of Saul's eldest boy. And, contra Cazaelles, we cannot assume that David had already killed the sons of Abinadab, Malchishua, and Ishbosheth—the text is clearly silent on this point.³⁶ The author makes it clear that David would not kill Saul's descendants on a whim—David's grief at the deaths of Saul and his sons is more than a feigned sadness (cf. 2 Sam 1 and 4). Note that David's execution of both the Amalekite who took credit for killing Saul and those who conspired against Ishbosheth bolsters this conclusion (cf. 2 Sam 1:14–15; 4:12).³⁷

Finally, it is also possible that the author of 2 Sam may have wanted the reader to question the legitimacy of Rizpah's children to begin with. It is no coincidence that the author notes that Abner had slept with Rizpah after Saul's death (cf. 2 Sam 3:7). Whichever option you prefer, David's choice of Rizpah's children highlights the fact that David easily could have been within the constraints of his vow.

Merab's Sons

This still leaves us with the reasoning behind David's choice of Merab's children. Why would David choose these Saulides and perhaps leave those closer to the throne alive, if in fact his motive was to secure the throne from contenders as some posit? Verse 7 may give us insight into the mindset of David in this regard. In the context, the author tells us that

who insists that Saul's sons must have had male offspring ("David's Monarchy and the Gibeonite Claim," 172). Cazelles concludes (contra Glüch) that David did not need to fear these few remaining descendants of Saul because the kingdom was already secure in his hands. Also, an important grammatical feature in 21:6 is the phrase noting that the Gibeonites wanted *שבעה אנשים מבניו* ("seven men *from* his [Saul's] sons"). Here one must consider the possible partitive force of the *min* preposition on the word *מבניו* (i.e., "*from* his sons"). While one could argue for a *min* of "source," the partitive nuance of the *min* cannot be ruled out and appears to fit the context best. Thus, contra Campbell who suggests that this was "all" of Saul's sons, the Gibeonites asked for seven from among them not "all" (כל) of them. Cf. Antony F. Campbell, *2 Samuel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 189–90.

36. Cazelles, "David's Monarchy and the Gibeonite Claim," 172. Furthermore, contra Brueggemann, Mephibosheth would have been more of a threat than the extended family of Saul noted here in 21:1–14 especially in light of the claims of Ziba in 2 Sam 16:3 (*First and Second Samuel*, 337).

37. Some assert that David hired Ishbosheth's assassins only later to have them killed because he was complicit in the crime. However, the text makes no such claims nor does it intimate such a connection. This is the typical argument used for the purpose of painting David as a supposed tyrant and cold-blooded murderer.

David spared Mephibosheth on account of the “oath of the LORD” (שבעת יהיה) that was between him and Jonathan.³⁸ This oddly placed notation gives the reader a possible clue as to David’s view of oath taking; viz., David keeps his vows where Saul had not. At least in the case of Merab, David’s choice of her sons may be directly connected to Saul’s lack of keeping his word or oaths to David (and others). Glaring examples appear in both 1 Sam 19:6 and 26:17–25. In the former text, Saul makes a vow (שבט) before Jonathan that he would not kill David whereas in the latter case Saul promised not to hurt David. Yet Saul made every attempt to kill David until he himself was killed by the Philistines (cf. 1 Sam 31). It is obvious from these examples that Saul had a problem in keeping his word and vows.³⁹ These examples being noted, the most important instance of Saul’s failure to live up to his vows is when he refused to keep his word in giving Merab to David as a wife—not once, but twice (cf. 1 Sam 17:25 and 18:17–19).⁴⁰

In 1 Sam 17:25 the author intimates that Saul had made a two-fold promise to the man who would kill Goliath: first, he promised he would give his daughter to the victor as a wife, and second, he promised to make that man’s family “free” (חפשי) in Israel (cf. 1 Sam 17:25).⁴¹ Although Merab is not named directly in the text, the fact that she was the oldest, as is noted later in 1 Sam 18:17, appears to be proof that she was the one in view here (note Laban’s response to Jacob in Gen 29:26).⁴² Yet we see that this promise is not fulfilled when David kills

38. Many scholars have noted that 2 Sam 21 must have preceded 2 Sam 9. Cf., for example, Perdue, “Is There Anyone Left of the House of Saul,” 75. However, it is apparent that oath-taking/covenant is important in this portion of 2 Sam and it is for this reason that the notation on David’s oath to Jonathan is being included here. See further comments by Rost, *The Succession Narratives*, 66.

39. One could also note his rash vow in 1 Sam 14:24–45 where Saul promised to kill anyone who ate during the battle with the Philistines. It was only the insistence of the army that stopped Saul from killing Jonathan. Nonetheless, Saul still broke a vow made before Yahweh.

40. Steussy asks the question as to whether there is any connection between 2 Sam 21:8 and 1 Sam 18:17–19 but stops short of answering her own question (*David: Biblical Portraits of Power*, 74). On the other hand, David Jobling draws a direct correlation between these two events (*1 Samuel* [Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998], 183).

41. This no doubt refers to an exemption from taxation. So P. Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel* (AB 8; New York: Doubleday, 1980), 304.

42. Even though some simply note the possibility of this being a local custom, no clear refutation has been offered that this was not in fact a wider reaching practice (see comments by Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26* [NAC 1B; Nashville, TN:

Goliath. Furthermore, to add insult to injury, not only is David not rewarded with Merab,⁴³ but later David has to protect his parents from Saul's murderous threats by spiriting them away to the land of Moab (1 Sam 22:3–4)—David and his family were far from being “free” in Israel.

In the second account of 1 Sam 18, Saul once again promises Merab to David (this time explicitly). McCarter suggests that the reason Saul did not give Merab to David at this time was because David rejected the offer.⁴⁴ McCarter's opinion may have merit if it were not for the fact that the text is silent on this and that David immediately accepted Saul's invitation to marry Michal after the bride price was negotiated (cf. 1 Sam 18:26). In the case of Merab, David may have been merely following ANE negotiation protocol.⁴⁵ He surely was not concerned about paying a dowry because he had technically already paid it with his slaying of Goliath and by his service to Saul as a victorious military leader (cf. 1 Sam 18:17).⁴⁶ Moreover, it appears that David had indeed accepted Saul's offer to marry Merab according to the wording of the text. First

Broadman & Holman, 2005], 470). Furthermore, some have correctly noted the similarities between 2 Sam 18:17 and Jacob's marital issues with Leah and Rachel in Gen 29. Cf. Robert B. Lawton, “1 Samuel 18: David, Merob, and Michal,” *CBQ* 51 (1989): 423–25. For comments on Gen 29:26 cf. Nahum Sarna, *Genesis* (JPS Torah Commentary; New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 205; and Victor P. Hamilton, who suggest this may have been only a “local custom” (*The Book of Genesis Chapters 18–50* [NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995], 263). See also rabbinic comments concerning Laban's deception and Leah's response in *Gen. Rab.* 70.19.

43. So too Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative*, 64.

44. McCarter, “The Historical David,” 120 n. 8.

45. Note the negotiations between Abraham and Ephron the Hittite in Gen 23:4–20 and David with Araunah in 2 Sam 24:21–24. In both cases there is the initial willingness by the one being approached with a request to respond with deference followed by a refusal to accept the money being offered. In each case, however, the money offered for the land is readily accepted.

46. Despite David's slaying of Goliath, Saul still required that David fight valiantly for him (אך היהילי לבן-היל והלחם מלחמות יהוה) lit. “only be for me as a *son of strength* [i.e., a “valiant man” or a “worthy man” see this latter rendering in 1 Kgs 1:52 by the NASB] and fight the battles of Yahweh”) in order to receive Merab as a wife—something David obviously did without actually getting Merab. Moreover, our assumption seems to be correct based upon David's willingness to provide a bride price for Michal but not for Merab (see esp. 1 Sam 18:23 where David notes his “poor” status [איש-ירש lit. I am “a poor man”] thus suggesting he could not “afford” Michal).

Sam 18:19 seems to suggest that some arrangement had been made to give Merab to David.⁴⁷ The text reads,

ויהי בעת תת את־מרב בת־שאול לדוד והיא נתנה לעדריאל המהלתי לאשה

“And it was when the time came to give Merab the daughter of Saul to David that she was given to Adriel the Meholathite as a wife.”

Here it seems clear that Merab had indeed been promised to David but once again Saul goes back on his word.⁴⁸ Saul instead opts to give his younger daughter, Michal, to David for the purpose of entrapping him. The bride price entailed a potentially lethal request of securing 100 foreskins from the Philistines. The difference between the Merab and the Michal events is that David did indeed marry Michal. However, Merab never became the rightful wife of David, even though she was supposed to be—something that would not have sat well with the now-powerful David. Therefore it is very likely that David never accepted the marriage of Merab as lawful. This conclusion is bolstered by David’s odd request when he became king in Hebron. He insisted that Michal, his former wife, be returned to him, even though she was now married (unlawfully?) to someone else (2 Sam 3:13–16). One could conclude that had he actually married Merab, as he had Michal, he would have requested her also.

It appears that David’s selection of Merab’s sons in 2 Sam 21:8 shows that he had not forgotten Saul’s broken vows concerning her. While on the surface it may have appeared heartless for David to choose the five sons of Merab for execution, in essence he may have seen them as in some way “illegitimate” due to the fact Merab should have been his wife—a woman for whom he had risked his life in battle (cf. 1 Sam 18:17). Again, if our connection between Rizpah and Abner is correct, this illegitimacy motif finds further support. It appears that David took the opportunity in the Gibeonite situation to rectify the past wrongs of being denied Merab as a wife.

47. Contra Miscall, who suggests David consented to Merab’s marriage to Adriel (*The Workings of Old Testament Narrative*, 84). The text is silent on this and implies just the opposite.

48. So too the conclusion of Tony W. Cartledge, *I & 2 Samuel* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 232. Hertzberg points out that the Lucianic version of the LXX includes the notation that Merab “feared” David (*I & II Samuel*, 161). This has been offered as a possible reason for the marriage not going forward but this is certainly not noted here in the MT.

Those who suggest that this type of action does not accord with the character of David need only view his final acts before his death. David was not above holding a grudge or settling scores. We see the reality of this in his instructions to Solomon while the aged king lay on his deathbed. He directed Solomon to “act according to his wisdom” (ועשית כהכמתך) regarding both Joab and Shimei who had wronged him in the past (1 Kgs 2:5–6, 9 respectively). What is more, the very last words of David which are recorded in 1 Kgs 2:9 are in fact the explicit instructions to Solomon concerning Shimei who had “cursed” (קלל) him with a “violent curse” (קללה נמרצת). We cannot be sure of the reason for David’s change of heart in the matter of Shimei, for example, but it is very possible that in his declining years, David recognized the inherent dangers of allowing insurrection and treasonous actions to go unchecked.⁴⁹ Regardless of how one interprets these last commands, David is not the one doing the executing, Solomon is.

Finally, the literary arrangement of 2 Sam 21–24 seems to help answer another fundamental question as to the purpose of our pericope within the chapters that follow. Beyond the practical purpose aimed solely at David’s desire for justice and to correct broken promises, there may also be a literary motivation rooted in Judean royal ideology.

THE LITERARY PURPOSE OF 2 SAM 21–24

The apparent lack of chronological ordering of the last four chapters of 2 Sam (often called an appendix), of which our text serves as the introduction, is rooted in the literary purposes of the compiler. These chapters served as a “mopping up” and preparation for Solomon’s rise to the throne.⁵⁰ What is more, scholars have also long struggled with the placement of chapters 21–24 at the end of 2 Sam because of their

49. The narrative tension in this part of the story is evident. What is one to do with David’s previous “pardon” granted, for example, to Shimei (cf. 2 Sam 19:23) and the breach of this pardon here in 1 Kgs 2? Perdue insists that David has abandoned earlier principles of *hesed* and forgiveness and warns Solomon that “only the use of merciless power may effectively quell internal discord and create a united kingdom” (“Is There Anyone Left of the House of Saul,” 74). Similarly, Steussy suggests that these acts prove that David was a man who could not be trusted to keep his oaths (*David: Biblical Portraits of Power*, 80, 82). However, there may be a better explanation based upon the broken oaths of *others* not David’s. For example, we know from the text that even though David told Solomon to vindicate him concerning Shimei, it was in fact the broken oath of Shimei to Solomon that brought about his own death (cf. 1 Kgs 2:38–46). Therefore, David in effect did keep his word about not killing Shimei.

50. R. P. Gordon also points out linguistic links in these passages (e.g., compare 21:14 to 24:25 and 21:17 to 22:29) (*1 & 2 Samuel* [Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1984], 95–96).

apparent disruption of the Succession Narratives.⁵¹ Again, there is a logical reason for the ordering as we now have it.⁵² It is clear that 2 Sam 21–24 serves as a fitting epilogue to David’s life while 1 Kgs 1–2 shows the actual transition to Solomon’s rule.⁵³ Moreover, the theme, “the righting of past wrongs” finds parallels in both 2 Sam 21:1–14 and 1 Kgs 1–2.⁵⁴ It is clear that 2 Sam 21–24 brings David’s life to a close and sets the stage for both the smooth transition of the kingship and the peaceful reign of Solomon.⁵⁵ Interestingly, some ancient textual witnesses even continue 2 Sam up to 1 Kgs 2:12.⁵⁶ While an in-depth discussion concerning all the scholarly opinions about these chapters must be reserved for another time, a few comments should suffice to bolster my point.

To begin with, as noted above, 2 Sam 21:1–14 serves as David’s chance to correct wrongs done by Saul to both him and the Gibeonites. By this one act David and the Gibeonites are avenged, the land is

51. For example cf. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 248 and McCarter, *II Samuel*, 16–19. Scholars have also noted the apparent chronological discrepancy for the placement of 2 Sam 21:1–14 within the closing chapters of 2 Sam. Cf. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 635–36. See the text-critical discussion by Chavel, “Compositry and Creativity,” 45–50. See also the suggested redaction process of our section as proposed by K. Budde, *Die Bücher Samuel erklärt* (KHC 8; Tübingen and Leipzig: J. C. B. Mohr, 1902), 304 (as cited by Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 248).

52. See comments on the thematic and concentric structure of these chapters by Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 95. Contra Brueggemann, who suggests that chapters 21–24 are an “intrusion” into the account of 2 Sam 20–1 Kgs (*First and Second Samuel*, 335).

53. Mordechai Cogan notes that the general consensus has concluded that the Succession Narratives of 2 Sam 9–20 originally ended with 1 Kgs 1 and parts of 1 Kgs 2 (*1 Kings* [AB 10: New York: Doubleday, 2000], 165). Note the work of German source critics on the Succession Narratives who conclude that the block ends at 1 Kgs 2. Cf. Rost, *Succession Narratives*, 66–67.

54. Concerning these closing chapters, Petersen comments that “the biblical writers have presented to us a David whose laments are, ultimately, answered” (“Portraits of David,” 141).

55. The account of Adonijah’s bloodless coup is best seen as fulfilling the last part of David’s self-imposed four-part judgment of 2 Sam 12:6. It is clear that David’s self-judgment serves a rhetorical purpose throughout 2 Sam and 1 Kgs 1–2 and no doubt is the main reason for the inclusion of many of the accounts in this portion of the Deuteronomistic History. E.g., The death of the unnamed son of Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:19); Amnon’s death (2 Sam 13:29); Absalom’s coup and death (2 Sam 14–18 esp. 18:15); and Adonijah’s death at the hands of Solomon (1 Kgs 2:25).

56. So LXX^L and Josephus’ beginning of *Antiquities* book 8 at the same place (as noted by McCarter, *II Samuel*, 17).

apparently now free from the curse of famine, Solomon's throne is secured from possible illegitimate Saulide contenders, and the Gibeonites are now reconciled with Israel and indebted to David.⁵⁷ Second, the relating of the accounts concerning the defeats of the offspring of Goliath (i.e., 2 Sam 21:15–22) serves as a fitting bookend or *inclusio* to David's military life. Here the author of 2 Sam brings to a close the military acts of David by drawing attention to the greatest military action of David's life—the killing of Goliath (cf. 1 Sam 17). David's life as a warrior is praised by the author while pointing out that he was now at an age where he could no longer go out to war (cf. 2 Sam 21:16–17); a new king is thus needed to lead the people. At the same time this closing pericope in 2 Sam 21 paves the way for Solomon's peaceful reign free from the threats of the Philistine giants—something that had caused David's predecessor to be gripped with fear (cf. 1 Sam 17:11).

Third, chapters 22 and 23 are psalms/songs recounting Yahweh's deliverance of David from his enemies including Saul (cf. esp. vv. 1, 4, 18, 38–49). In verses 1–18 of chapter 22 the author recounts, in theophanic and cosmological terms, the protection afforded David by his God. Here David declares his “cleanness” (בר; vv. 21, 25) before Yahweh because of his “blameless” (תמים; vv. 26, 33) and “pure” (ברר; v. 27) state. In light of these abundant blessings, protection, and his righteous position before Yahweh, the aged king is ready to die in peace and pass the torch to his descendants (cf. 22:50).

Chapter 23, already assigned the phrase, “the last words of David” in verse 1, is another song of David (vv. 1–7). In typical Deuteronomistic style, the book of Samuel draws to a close with the final words of Israel's greatest leader of this period. Both Deuteronomy and Joshua end in similar fashion.⁵⁸ The author clearly desired the reader to

57. Gibeon appears to have been neutral in the civil war between Ishbosheth and David (cf. 2 Sam 2 and 20:8). There can be no doubt that this act solidified an important political bond between the Gibeonites and David and ultimately Solomon. It is no coincidence that Solomon chooses to worship at the high place at Gibeon (cf. 1 Kgs 3; 2 Chr 1). Interestingly, a Gibeonite soldier (Ishmaiah), was over David's thirty mighty men (cf. 1 Chr 12:4).

58. McCarter correctly notes that the material in chapters 21–24 accrued in this order at a very early date and does in fact reflect the typical *modus operandi* of ancient biblical authors to place poems and “miscellaneous materials” before the death of the leader in question (cf. Jacob's words in Gen 49:1–27; Moses' words in Deut 31–33) (*II Samuel*, 17). To this we also add Joshua's words in Josh 23–24. See also the conclusions of Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (trans. J. Doull, et al.; JSOTSup 15; Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1981), 35. So too Gordon J. Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 124. Wenham notes, “These farewells typically review what God has done in the dying hero's lifetime, make predictions about the future, and urge their successors to be loyal to God.”

draw these connections. It is also in chapter 23 (cf. vv. 8–39) where we find the extended list of David’s mighty men (גבורים) and their acts of deliverance on behalf of the house of Israel. The extended list of chapter 23, while at first glance appearing to have no contextual purpose, actually serves two immediate functions: first to praise the men who faithfully served and fought alongside of David and second, to alert the reader that David was leaving his throne and son under the protection of a well-qualified bodyguard.⁵⁹ This reading is supported by the mention of David’s “mighty men” (גבורים) in 1 Kgs 1:8 who sided with Solomon instead of Adonijah during Adonijah’s bid for the throne (cf. also 1 Kgs 1:10).

Next, while chapter 24 has often been paralleled with one of the themes of 21:1–14 (i.e., the cessation of a plague/curse through sacrifices), it still serves at least two rhetorical functions for the compiler. First, it presents Yahweh’s chance to right the wrongs he has suffered at the hands of the Israelites (cf. 24:1).⁶⁰ With Yahweh’s anger abated against Israel, Solomon can embark upon a peaceful reign with no fear that Yahweh will lash out against him for the past sins of the people. The author’s notation in 1 Kgs 4:24–25, which states that there was peace on every side, brings poignancy to this assertion. Moreover, the notice in verse 25 that every man would dwell under his fig tree in safety recalls the idyllic prophetic perspective of the eschaton (cf. Mic 4:4). Second, we see that 2 Sam 24 further establishes Jerusalem as the place of Yahweh’s mercy and the future site of the temple (cf. 24:16–25). Araunah’s threshing floor serves as the ideal place for the temple as later noted by the Chronicler (cf. 2 Chr 3:1).⁶¹

The actual transition of power is recorded in 1 Kgs 1:1–2:9. Here we find David’s final words to Bathsheba, Nathan, and Solomon. These chapters also present a setting-in-order of the final particulars of the dying king (mostly enacted by Solomon)—a return to the motif of 2 Sam

59. ANE bodyguards were often made up of those loyal to the king alone, both foreign and native born (e.g., 1 Sam 28:2). This was often the case of the Praetorian Guard under the Caesars (cf. William A. Simmons for notes on the presence of German soldiers among the Praetorian Guard [*Peoples of the New Testament World* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 238–61 esp. 239, 244]). The NIV translators capture best the essence of the Hebrew in 1 Kgs 1:8 by rendering הגבורים as “special guard.”

60. We can only speculate about what the sin of the people was which angered Yahweh to the point of inciting David to number the people. It is possible that it may have been connected to their treatment of Yahweh’s anointed king during the coup of Absalom (cf. 2 Sam 15–18).

61. So too Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 96.

21:1–14. Rivals to the throne are killed (i.e., Adonijah and possibly Joab) and the wrongs done to David by Shimei and Joab are resolved by their respective executions.⁶² Interestingly, Joab’s siding with Adonijah appears to have been the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back. David knew that his old deceptive general was not to be trusted with his young son on the throne, thus the order for his execution was issued.⁶³

A FINAL NOTE ON HISTORICAL-CULTURAL CONTEXT

It is worth noting that David’s actions in preparing the throne for his son are nothing new in light of similar ANE protocol, especially when viewed alongside of the Chronicler’s rendition of Israel’s history. Of course, whether or not the compiler of the text was making a form-critical connection to similar ANE throne transitions cannot be known conclusively. What is certain, however, is that historically, formal ceremonies often involving the swearing of allegiances and detailed preparations played a key part in the transfer of power to the next generation.⁶⁴ This is especially true of kings who were afforded the opportunity to make such arrangements before their natural demise (many kings died prematurely in battle or through intrigue⁶⁵).

One glaring example of this practice occurs during the Neo-Assyrian Empire with Sennacherib’s son, Esarhaddon (681–669 B.C.E.). Esarhaddon took great pains to ensure that the transition of power in Assyria and Babylon went smoothly for his sons Ashurbanipal and Samash-shum-ukin respectively.⁶⁶ Specifically, Esarhaddon made sure

62. Shimei is executed after the death of David, but the wheels are set in motion to this end before David dies.

63. Joab is executed on account of his penchant for murdering innocent men (i.e., Abner and Amasa, cf. 2 Sam 3:27 and 20:10 respectively). David had no doubt delayed this act due to practical military purposes.

64. Moses’s transfer of power to Joshua is a prime example of this in the OT even though they were technically not “kings” or related (cf. Num 27:18–23; Deut 31). Jehoiada’s actions toward Joash are also telling of the planning made by the priest on behalf of the deceased king, Ahaziah (2 Kgs 11). Jehoiada caused the military leaders (i.e., his bodyguard) to swear allegiance to Joash (vv. 4–12).

65. In the biblical text, Saul (1 Sam 31) and Josiah (2 Kgs 23:29) are examples, whereas prominent parallels in the ANE are Sennacherib who was killed through intrigue and Alexander the Great who died from disease without an heir.

66. R. Frankena, “The Vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon and the Dating of Deuteronomy,” in *Oudtestamentische Studiën* 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 122–54 esp. 123–24 and “Vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon,” translated by Erica Reiner (*ANET*, 537–41 esp. lines 283–669).

that vassal kings swore allegiance to his sons while he was still alive.⁶⁷ Interestingly, the Chronicler develops a similar picture as that recorded in the Assyrian annals when he presents all the leaders of Israel swearing allegiance to their new king Solomon under the watchful eye of David (cf. 1 Chr 29:1, 20–24). In light of this connection, it should be of no surprise that David made sure that all the “loose ends” were tied up, allowing for the smooth transition of power to Solomon. After all, David lived in an ANE context of covenant, curses, and vows that cannot be divorced even from the theological biases of our Text.

CONCLUSION

We could adopt the conclusions of many modern thinkers that David’s darker side is clearly visible in 2 Sam 21:1–14. However, this perspective is an oversimplification of a complex rhetorical purpose of the compiler by appealing to modern scholarly presuppositions and theories. It is very likely in light of our discussion above that David is acting within the context of ANE treaties and within his legal rights as a wronged and lied-to man. David is not seeking to hand over to the Gibeonites just any of Saul’s sons, but rather is acting in a calculated manner based upon past faults suffered at the hand of Saul—2 Sam 22:1 hints at this long-standing grudge/struggle. At the same time we can soundly propose that the compiler of these closing chapters is also showing that David, as a shrewd monarch, has both prepared and removed any obstacles to the smooth transition to Solomon’s peaceful reign. In bypassing chronological concerns of the text, the compiler is showing that David’s and Solomon’s external and internal enemies are subdued, the land is free from the curses of the Saulide regime, and Yahweh is at peace with his people. Yes, David may at first glance appear to be exhibiting his darker side, but in essence there is a greater rhetorical purpose in play—David, Israel’s greatest king, is a shrewd leader and father. The author of this material makes it clear, as he has throughout, that David may not be a perfect man but he does follow after God’s own heart (cf. 2 Sam 22). For the modern reader perhaps it is best to take Steussy’s words to heart when viewing David in these closing chapters. She concludes, “Our glimpses of David’s heart have shown us a man more worldly-wise, more fallible, and considerably less pious [. . .

67. Nine extant copies of the Esarhaddon treaty commemorating this event have been found, listing no less than eight rulers who swore allegiance to the new rulers. See *ANET*, 534 n. 1.

] What has been lost in admirability, however, has been gained in believability. David's heart looks remarkably like anyone else's."⁶⁸

68. Steussy, *David: Biblical Portraits of Power*, 70.