

## The King Takes—The King Gives: Deuteronomistic Critique of Power Play in 2 Samuel 16 and 19\*

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Lord Acton's statement about power and corruption appears to be invariably true in all times. He states, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men."<sup>1</sup> The altruism of this statement is very much applicable to King David, when his story, as is told in the Deuteronomistic History, is read more critically. R. A. Carlsson has divided the biblical story of David in two parts, namely, David under the blessing (which is almost coincident with the History of David's Rise [HDR]) and David under the curse (almost coterminous with Succession Narrative [SN]).<sup>2</sup> As David amassed power and influence, he also proportionately became oppressive and corrupt. Because of the place he occupies in redemptive history, David's many acts of injustice are scarcely given adequate attention, except the more celebrated case of adultery with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite.

\* The present article draws heavily on aspects of chapter six of the author's book, *The Fate of Saul's Progeny in the Reign of David* (Eugene: Pickwick Publication, 2011), used by permission of Wipf and Stock Publishers (see [www.wipfandstock.com](http://www.wipfandstock.com)). Dr. Tushima serves on the faculty of Jos ECWA Theological Seminary (JETS), Nigeria, where he is currently the Dean of Graduate School and Ag. Director of PhD program. He is also an adjunct professor with Eastern University, St. Davids, PA, USA.

1. This statement is known to have been first made by John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton (1834–1902), the renowned English historian and moralist, in his letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887. See John Dalberg-Acton, "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely," The Phrase Finder, <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/absolute-power-corrupts-absolutely.html> (accessed May 10, 2012).

2. R. A. Carlsson, *The Chosen King: A Traditio-Historical Approach to the Second Book of Samuel* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1964), 30-35.

In this study, I will pay attention to the manner in which David expropriated Mephibosheth's patrimony and bestowed it upon Ziba, and later grudgingly sought to return half of the estate to Mephibosheth. I will employ a narrative critical reading of the relevant section of 2 Samuel 16 and 19 in explicating the power play contained therein, and its concomitant injustices. A narrative critical reading of biblical narrative is essential for the explication of its world because of its *historarity*.<sup>3</sup> I will subsequently evaluate David's actions against Mephibosheth on the basis of the provisions of the Deuteronomic Code for justice in YHWH's covenant community. The goal of all this is to demonstrate, from the biblical text, the necessity for working for social justice in order to ensure the rise of free, just, and virtuous societies—the necessary platform for social transformation and development, and the creation of humane societies.

It was common practice in the ancient Near East for a new dynasty to annihilate its predecessor's members.<sup>4</sup> A close reading of 2 Samuel reveals that David also, in surreptitious ways, sought to decimate the routed dynasty of Saul. The structure below manifests an increasingly sullied portrayal of David, especially where the Saulides are concerned. A case in point is the report of the murders of the Saulides placed in the outer rings, (A) and (A') respectively, of the quasi-chiasm. The first reported case (A) is accompanied by a determined effort to absolve David of blame, while there is ambiguity in the second case (A') that makes him generally responsible, if not directly guilty, for the murders. In the first confrontation with a Saulide (B), David subverts Michal's accusation of impropriety as he forcefully argues that what Michal considers disgraceful is a manifestation of his piety, whereas in the second confrontation (B'), David's piety is displayed by not responding to the charge of blood guilt. The narrator neither affirms nor denies Shimei's charge of David's blood guilt with regard to dead Saulides, another ambiguous portrayal of David. The twin accounts of land granting similarly paint David in darker hues. The first report (C) shows him acting to fulfill covenant loyalty, while the second account (C') portrays him as being bound to a man who used graft to ingratiate himself with the king. At the core

3. A word of my own coinage based on the Bible's historical and literary features. *Historarity*, therefore, is the noun form, while the adjectival form would be *Historary*. All narratives are imbued with elements of history, literary artistry and ideology. The *Historary* nature of biblical narrative accents the fact that it arises ontologically (at the human compositional level) from the ground and realm of history, existentially inhabits a literary sphere (hence its "historarity"), and is teleologically driven toward theological ends.

4. Biblical examples of this phenomenon can be found in Judg 9:1-5; 1 Kgs 15:25-29; 16:8-11; and 2 Kgs 10:1-1.

is the account of David's hasty confiscation of Mephibosheth's land without affording him the opportunity to defend himself as required by the Torah, a matter we will return to later in the paper. These accounts, together with the pattern in which they are reported, suggest the very manner of their telling to be a sad commentary on the way David administered (or failed to administer) justice.

- A Mephibosheth mentioned in the story of the deaths of Abner and Ishbosheth at the hands of Davidic sympathizers (2 Sam 3 & 4)
- B Saulide princess (Michal) confronts David (2 Sam 6:20-23)
- C Mephibosheth invested with his grandfather's patrimony by David (2 Sam 9:7, 9)
- D Mephibosheth divested of his grandfather's patrimony by David (2 Sam 16:4)
- B' Saulide sympathizer (Shimei) confronts David (2 Sam 16:5-8)
- C' Mephibosheth partially re-invested with his grandfather's patrimony by David (2 Sam 19:30)
- A' Mephibosheth mentioned in the story of the death of the Saulide Seven at David's instance (2 Sam 21:1-14)

### **The Unjust Image of David in 2 Samuel**

The worsening portrayal of David as an unjust king follows his supposed return of Saul's patrimony to Mephibosheth (2 Sam 9), and only becomes worse as his story continues to be interjected by episodes concerning Mephibosheth (2 Sam 16, 19). After the account of David's encounter with Mephibosheth in chapter 9, the next story involving an Israelite is that of David's adultery with and the expropriation of Bathsheba (2 Sam 11), after the murder of her husband. This dastardly act of injustice is roundly denounced by the prophet Nathan (2 Sam 12). On the heels of the Bathsheba fiasco follows the story of Amnon's skillfully orchestrated rape of his half-sister Tamar; David's failure to bring Amnon to justice would eventually result in the latter's murder by Tamar's brother Absalom (2 Sam 13). Indeed, for four years preparatory to his rebellion, Absalom demonstrated to all Israel that David's reign was a fraud as far as the dispensation of justice was concerned (2 Sam 15:1-7). Absalom's accusation is vindicated by the dramatized tale of the Tekoite woman (2 Sam 14): It took the Tekoite's threefold coaxing to get David to make a categorical pronouncement on the fictional case she presented to him. Similarly, David's injustice to the Saulides, demonstrated in his (re)confiscation of Mephibosheth's assets (2 Sam 16:1-4), finds expression on the lips of Shimei, who minces no words in charging that David has Saulide blood on his hands (2 Sam 16:5-7).

There is a definite pattern that highlights David's unjust actions within these chapters. In the first two cases, the demonstration of the king's injustice is laid out first (the Bathsheba debacle and his failure to redress Tamar's humiliation in chapters 11, 13 to 14) before he is expressly called unjust (chs. 12:1-12; and 15:1-4). In the case of Mephibosheth, the king's injustice is demonstrated twice (in the confiscation of the estate [16:1-4] and then in his half-hearted return of half of it [19:30, ET 29]), while the verbalization comes in-between the two demonstrations (ch. 16:5-7). This pattern is illustrated in the schema below:

- A The murder of Uriah/the snatching of Bathsheba (2 Sam 11)
- B David declared unjust (2 Sam 12:1-12)
- A' The rape of Tamar/the inaction of David (2 Sam 13)
- B' David declared unjust (2 Sam 15:1-4)
- A'' David confiscates Mephibosheth's Patrimony (2 Sam 16:1-4)
- B'' David declared unjust (2 Sam 16:5-7)
- A' David fails to return Mephibosheth's Patrimony (2 Sam 19:30, ET 29)

The double demonstration of the king's injustice to Mephibosheth thus places greater emphasis on it than on the first two cases. In short, the entire context in which David's encounters with Mephibosheth are recorded is so drenched in Davidic injustice that it forms the necessary background against which these events are to be read.

Of the three chapters dealing with the relations between David and Mephibosheth, 2 Samuel 16 and 19 fall within the Absalom revolt narrative. Taking that revolt as the context of these two chapters, scholars have recognized their location in what Robert P. Gordon calls "the mirror image" structure of the departure and return of David from and to Jerusalem (cf. 2 Sam 15:19-16:13; 19:17-41).<sup>5</sup> This structure, constituted with tales of rebellion at its outer margins (15:1-12; 19:42-20:22), is built around the two domains of conflict: the duel of the counselors (Ahitophel and Hushai) and the clash of the armies. Between the tales of rebellion and the domains of conflict are found the intermediate points of the "meeting scenes." Charles Conroy gives this structure:<sup>6</sup>

5. Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, Library of Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 289.

6. Charles Conroy, *Absalom Absalom!: Narrative and Language in 2 Sam 13-20* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 89. For a similar chiasmic structure see A.A. Anderson, *2 Samuel: World Biblical Commentary* (Waco: Word Books, 1989), 202.

- A Rebellion breaks out (15:1–12)
- B The King’s flight: meeting scenes (15:13–16:14)
  - C Clash of counselors (16:15–17:23)
  - C’ Clash of the armies (17–19:9)
- B’ The King’s return: meeting scenes (19:9–41)
- A’ The King returns to Jerusalem, and the final stirrings of rebellion are crushed (19:42–20:22)

Concentrating on the meeting scenes, which contain reports about Mephibosheth, Conroy points out the fascinating order and category of people who encountered David. During the king’s flight, the meeting scenes begin with folks with the most congenial sentiments toward the king. The first set of people to meet the king are the Davidic loyalists (Ittai and the Gittite mercenaries, the priests, Hushai); second is a man of doubtful loyalty (Ziba); and finally a man openly hostile to David (Shimei). On the homeward journey, the first person to encounter David is the repentant adversary (Shimei); second is a man of doubtful loyalty (Mephibosheth); lastly a loyal friend (Barzillai).<sup>7</sup> This symmetry can be demonstrated in a chiasmic structure as follows:

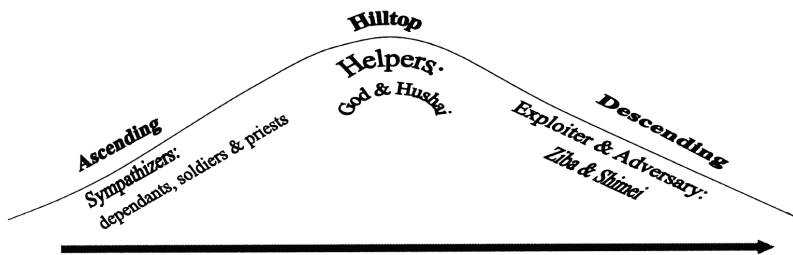
- A David and his loyalists—Ittai, the priests, and Hushai (2 Sam 15:17–36)
- B David and a man of doubtful loyalty—Ziba (2 Sam 16:1–4)
- C David and an adversary—Shimei (2 Sam 16:6–12)
- C’ David and the repentant adversary—Shimei (2 Sam 19:17–18a)
- B’ David and a man of doubtful loyalty—Mephibosheth (2 Sam 19:25–31)
- A’ David and a loyalist—Barzillai (2 Sam 19:32–40)

In the above chiasmic structure, the mention of Mephibosheth, both in the flight and the return meeting scenes, occurs within the sphere of the man of doubtful loyalty. In this way David’s ambivalence toward him is implicitly suggested.<sup>8</sup>

7. Conroy, *Absalom*, 89. The structure is adapted from Conroy.

8. Expatriating on the symmetry of the “meeting scenes,” Robert Alter writes, “There is an approximate symmetry between David’s encounters in his exodus from Jerusalem and those that now occur in his return. Then he met a hostile Shimei, now he meets a contrite Shimei. Then he met Ziba, who denounced his master Mephibosheth; now he meets Mephibosheth himself, who defends his own loyalty. Then he spoke with Ittai, the loyalist who insisted on accompanying him; now he speaks with Barzillai, the proven loyalist who refuses to accompany him back to the capital. The encounter with Hushai, who

For a clearer appreciation of this context (of Absalom's revolt), in which the Mephibosheth references are embedded, there is the need for a closer look at the "meeting scenes" during the flight from Jerusalem. In these meeting scenes, both the direction of movement and the landscape are employed for rhetorical effects (see the diagram below). As David departed the palace and proceeded to cross the Kidron Valley and to ascend the Mount of Olives, he was initially followed by members of his royal household, loyal fighting squads, and the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sam 15:16-31). This group consisted of three categories of people, namely, the large group of sympathizers composed of those who completely depended on David for their safety (household members, esp. 2 Sam 15:16, 18a); those upon whom David would rely for the defense of his kingdom (the fighting squads, cf. 2 Sam 15:18b-23); and those upon whom David would lean for his intelligence gathering network in enemy territory (the priests, cf. 2 Sam 15:24-29, esp. vv. 27-28).



*David's Meeting Scenes on His Flight  
from Jerusalem through the Mount of Olives*

At the top of the Mount of Olives, David encounters the second group, consisting of helpers (2 Sam 15:32-37). While one member of this group is implied (the deity), the other is explicitly mentioned (Hushai). During the ascent phase of the flight, David was informed of Ahitophel's defection to Absalom. In response to this cheerless news, the king whispers a prayer to the deity. Then, the narrator informs the reader of David's encounter with Hushai at the place of worship (most likely a high place). In his encounter with Hushai at this place of worship, David meets the answer to his prayer, and by implication the deity meets him here. On his descent from the Mount of Olives, David

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becomes David's secret agent, has no counterpart here." See Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 315.

encounters Ziba, who exploits to his advantage the present crisis vis-à-vis David's paranoia about Saulides (2 Sam 16:1-4); and Shimei, an outright adversary (2 Sam 16:5-12).

There are a number of commonalities and divergences between these three categories of people, which help in our understanding of the narrator's characterization of Mephibosheth when David encounters him in the meeting scenes of the return from exile. A fuller consideration of these features will be taken up in our study of 2 Sam 19. The two most prominent features common to both sympathizers and helpers (of course, with the exception of the unnamed helper, the deity) were grieving with David—manifested by the signs of mourning that they bore—and showing willingness to follow their king into exile (2 Sam 15:23-24, 30, 32-33). They showed a willingness to help the king, and the king instructed them on what to do. In contradistinction, both the exploiter and the adversary evinced neither a sign of mourning for the king nor the willingness to follow him into exile. Again, while the exploiter (Ziba) brought help to the king; he did so by his initiative rather than by the king's instructions. The adversary (Shimei), on his own part, sought to hurt David, not help him. It is critical to keep this salient background in mind, therefore, as we explore David's interactions with Mephibosheth or with others concerning Mephibosheth.

### **Mephibosheth and a Disgraced David (2 Sam 16:1-4)**

The following is my translation of 2 Samuel 16:1-4:

1 Now David had barely<sup>9</sup> crossed over the summit of the hill,<sup>10</sup> and behold!<sup>11</sup> Ziba, Mephibosheth's steward, on hand to meet him with a

9. Literally, "little." Of the nearly eighty occurrences of *מְעַט* in the Hebrew Bible, this is one instance where it is used with respect to a spatial dimension. It is more commonly used in reference to such things as water (Gen 18:4); cattle (Gen 30:30); food (Gen 43:2, 11); years (Gen 47:9); time (Exod 17:4; and Ruth 2:7); rate of completion of a task (Exod 23:30; and Deut 7:22); population (Deut 26:5); feelings (Job 10:20b); status (Ps 8:6); and possessions (Prov 15:16).

10. Italicized words or phrases in this translation or any other translation in this paper are my own additions for the purpose of bringing out the fuller meaning of the statement concerned.

11. Distinctions are drawn between *וַהֲנִיחַ* and *וַהֲנִיחָהּ* on the basis of the contexts in which they are usually used. Tamar Zewi lists the most prominent contexts of their occurrence as follows: (1) *וַהֲנִיחַ* normally follows an inflected form of the biblical Hebrew verb of speech *אָמַר*, and introduces direct speech; and (2) *וַהֲנִיחָהּ* usually follows verbs of sight or descriptions of dreams, visions, or revelations, and customarily introduces content clauses related to verbs of sight or to some other previous context. She further adds, "Although these

pair of saddled donkeys, and upon them two hundred loaves of bread, a hundred cakes of raisin, a hundred summer fruits, and a pitcher of wine. 2 Then the king said to Ziba, “What do you mean by bringing these?”<sup>12</sup> Ziba replied, “The donkeys are for the king’s household to ride, the bread<sup>13</sup> and the summer fruits are for the troops<sup>14</sup> to eat, and the wine is for the weary to drink in the wilderness.” 3 And the king asked, “But where is your master’s son?” And Ziba replied the king, “Behold! He is staying in Jerusalem. For he said, ‘This day the house<sup>15</sup> of Israel shall return to me my father’s kingdom.’” 4 Then the king said to Ziba, “Behold! To you belongs everything that is Mephibosheth’s.” And Ziba replied, “I prostrate myself. May I find favor in your eyes, my lord the king.”

This scene is part of the sub-plot of the Absalom narrative that deals with David’s flight from Jerusalem, which runs from 2 Samuel 15:14 to 17:22. In David’s flight, his relationship with the subjects who interacted with him are characterized by three key terms, namely, עָבַר, “to cross over,” which appears twenty times in the unit (2 Sam 15:18, 22, 23, 24, 28, 33; 16:1, 9; 17:20, 21, 22); שׁוּב, “to turn, or return,” which appears six times (2 Sam 15:19, 20, 25, 27, 29, 34; 17:3); and שָׁב, “to remain, stay, or dwell,” which is found four times (2 Sam 15:19,

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occurrences are very common, a large number of instances do not share any of these characteristics. A thorough examination suggests that the contexts are very close to those involving verbs of sight and that they always entail some kind of watching activity. The verbs preceding וַיִּהְיֶה in these cases are frequently verbs of motion and are followed by an act of watching or listening (e.g., to come, to send, to rise early, to go, to descend, to ask)” (see Tamar Zewi, “The Particles הִנֵּה and וַיִּהְיֶה in Biblical Hebrew,” *Hebrew Studies* 37 [1996]: 21-37). While the particle וַיִּהְיֶה in our passage does not follow a verb of sight it perfectly fits into the way it is characterized: our context also requires some kind of watching activity, and the verb preceding it is a verb of motion עָבַר (“crossover”).

12. Literally, “What are these to you?” For similar questions see Genesis 33:5, 8; Exodus 12:26; Joshua 4:6; and Ezekiel 37:18 (cf. S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel*, 2d ed. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1913], 318). David began asking the right question about Ziba’s motive for bringing these gifts, which question the latter skillfully evaded. Sadly enough, David did not follow through on his initial question and thereby provided Ziba with the needed opportunity to malign his supposed master.

13. I follow the *Qere* reading (וְהַלֶּחֶם, “and the bread”) rather the *Ketiv* (וְלֶחֶם, “and as for the bread”) as do most of the ancient versions. On the ל prefixing the *Ketiv*, Driver comments, “The ל affords an example of the accidental repetition of a letter from a preceding word, such as has taken place—though it is not there corrected by the Masorah . . . .” See Driver, *The Books of Samuel*, 318.

14. Literally, “young men.” But here, as in many other cases, the reference is to the fighting men, hence our rendition of “troops.”

15. Two medieval manuscripts have בָּנָי (“sons”). This is not a big difference.



29; 16:3, 18). The first word relates to those whom David allowed to follow him in his flight; they “crossed over” with him. The second and third words relate to those whom David had asked to “return” to Jerusalem, and “remain” with the usurper. Both groups were working for David; a part of the first group would constitute the force that later would battle the rebels, while the second would return, remain, and engage in counterinsurgency behind enemy lines—working toward the return of the king.

The use of literary artistry for rhetorical effect in our scene (16:1-4) is noteworthy. The scene opens with David crossing over (עבר) the summit of the Mount of Olives (where he had just met God through answered prayer and Hushai as the answer to his prayer); and strategically stationed to meet him is Ziba. The people who had come out to David since the beginning of the flight had offered themselves to the king—to follow him whither he went. It is in response to such self-presentation that David determined who should cross over, who should return, and who should remain behind. Ziba did not present himself to the king to do the latter’s bidding, as all others who had met David thus far had done. Instead, he presented material things to David: there is no overt statement as to whether he was for or against the king—he remains opaque. Hence, the king uses neither “crossover” nor “return and remain” to address him. Rather, since he had come to the king with “things,” he went away with property. Ziba, on his own part, accused Mephibosheth of remaining (שב) behind on the latter’s initiative (a decision that was the king’s to make for loyal subjects) and of staying behind to work for himself against the king’s interest. The implication of this is that Ziba presented Mephibosheth’s alleged usurpation of the king’s prerogative of determining who remains behind as a proof of Mephibosheth’s high treason. This accusation incited the disgraced and vulnerable David enough that he decreed the confiscation of Mephibosheth’s inherited property and the transference of the same to Ziba.

In this scene, the narrator calls Ziba the *na’ar* (נער)<sup>16</sup> of Mephibosheth. In our first encounter with Ziba, in chapter 9, he was first called the

16. The way this term is employed in the Hebrew Bible shows it has four or, perhaps, five distinct uses. First, it is a reference one’s age, either a child or a young adult (Gen 37:2; 41:12; Exod 2:6; Deut 22:23; Judg 8:20; and 1 Sam 17:33, 42). Second, it refers to someone who is a lieutenant, an associate, or even someone who is second in command to a high ranking official (Exod 33:11; 2 Kgs 8: 4; and cf. 1 Kgs 11:17). Third, it refers to a servant who waits upon a master (1 Sam 2:13, 15, 18; 20:38; 25:14; 30:13; and 1 Kgs 3:7). Fourth, *na’ar* refers to footmen among fighting troops (1 Sam 16:18; 26:22; 30:17; and 2 Sam 1:15; 2:21). One common thread in all these uses of the term is that the

servant of Saul (9:1) and then the *na'ar* of Saul (9:9). In that capacity, whether as Saul's or Mephibosheth's steward, Ziba is expected to protect Mephibosheth's interest. Contrary to that expectation he is found here not only sabotaging but also actively subverting Mephibosheth's interest, and perhaps his very existence, for personal gain. To realize this gain, Ziba strategically stationed himself on David's anticipated escape route out of the city so as to avoid being interrupted by the many loyalists engaging the king's attention on his way out of town but also to be close enough to the outskirts of the city so as to meet the king in his traumatic moment of mystification and stupor.<sup>17</sup>

Along with him, Ziba brought two donkeys, two hundred loaves of bread, a hundred raisin cakes, a hundred cakes of summer fruits

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*na'ar* is expected to be loyal to his/her master: children to parents, lieutenants to their leader, servants to the master, and soldiers to their commanding officer. I do not find Ziba fitting strictly in any of these categories: the text does not offer us the luxury of that datum. My intuition is that Ziba may have been a high-ranking official in Saul's court who had managerial duties (which places him more in the second category above than any of the others). He is now charged with the responsibility of managing the late king's estate; hence, I have called him "steward."

17. Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg's supposition that Ziba acted on the spur of the moment and took with him what he had at hand cannot be substantiated. See Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), 345. The list of things that Ziba brought along for the king and his entourage consists of the things that you could not just go into the barn and pull out, bearing in mind that this was three thousand years ago when one could not just walk into a grocery store or supermarket to pick up two hundred loaves of bread off the shelf.

Gordon rightly sees through Ziba's dissimulation, "Appointed to look after Mephibosheth's estate (9:9-13), Ziba apparently saw the upheaval in Jerusalem as an opportunity to improve his own situation at Mephibosheth's expense. This, at any rate, seems the most likely explanation of the behavior of these two during this critical period for David. Ziba displays the calculated practicality of an opportunist who realizes David's vulnerability to every sympathetic gesture of support" (*I & II Samuel*, 277). In contradistinction to Gordon's position, Anderson is more trusting of Ziba's motivation: "If this episode is authentic, Ziba must have sympathized with David, since he could not predict the possible outcome of the rebellion; if anything, David's prospects at this point were rather bad" (2 Samuel, 205). What Anderson fails to take into account is that David had on his side his striker brigade that had been with him from his wilderness wandering days: all his commanding officers (very experienced and loyal people), and all the well-motivated and experienced mercenaries were still with David. When you juxtapose this vis-à-vis Absalom's untested and inexperienced rabble, it becomes apparent that the scales tilted, however delicately, more in David's favor than in Absalom's.

(probably figs), and a keg of wine.<sup>18</sup> When David, perhaps suspicious of Ziba's motive, questioned Ziba why he had brought all these items, he responded with a diversionary tactic. Rather than putting forth the ethical motivation for his action, which was most probably what David's query sought from him, Ziba went on describing what is to be done with the things he had brought: Even a child would know that asses are for riding and food is for eating. Yet, David was taken in by Ziba's dissembling.

Persuaded by Ziba's lackluster response, David proceeded to inquire about Mephibosheth's whereabouts. All of the discourses in Samuel that involve David directly talking to or about Mephibosheth are initiated with a question that David asked about or to Mephibosheth. In the first two of these (2 Sam 9 and 16:1-4), the inquiry concerns Mephibosheth's whereabouts. In 2 Samuel 19, David queried Mephibosheth for desertion. In the present passage (2 Sam 16:1-4), David's question (אֲדֹנָיִךְ בֶּן וְאִיָּהּ בֶּן, "But where is your master's son?") betrays the discrepancy in the perspectives of the narrator and David. The narrator views Ziba as Mephibosheth's servant, while David considered him Saul's servant. On this note, Alter is mistaken in thinking that David calls Ziba Jonathan's servant.<sup>19</sup> Jonathan never was Ziba's master anywhere in the entire text of Samuel, nor is Ziba anywhere referred to as Jonathan's servant. David directly linked Mephibosheth with his enemy Saul. And by that association, at this critical juncture of defining where people stood, he now overtly lists Mephibosheth among his enemies.

Seizing on this question that scarcely masks David's suspicion of Mephibosheth, Ziba opened his response with the exclamatory particle הִנֵּה ("behold"), which accentuates the presentational effect and, hence, the immediacy of the fact being introduced. Ziba's response to the king

18. David M. Gunn has compared this list to that found in 1 Samuel 25:18, and the similarities are striking. Besides the similarities of the items and their quantities that were brought to David, Gunn writes, "Both verses belong to a context where someone, attached to a potential enemy of David but acting independently of him, brings provisions to David as a conciliatory gesture. The people concerned are, respectively, Abigail the wife of Nabal, and Ziba the servant of Mephibosheth" (David M. Gunn, *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation* [Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1978], 50). We also note that both Abigail and Ziba state that the food items they brought were for David's troops (נַעֲרִים, cf. 1 Sam 25:27 and 2 Sam 16:2). Furthermore, just as Abigail had expected to be rewarded by David for her act (cf. 1 Sam 25:31), which he did by taking her into his harem upon her husband's death, Ziba's help was also not altruistic—he apparently had his eyes on Saul's estate.

19. "It is noteworthy that, at this late date, David still refers to Mephibosheth as 'your master's son,' still thinks of the long-dead Jonathan as Ziba's real master" (Alter, *The David Story*, 291).

in 16:3 can equally be translated “Behold, the inhabitant of Jerusalem.” The phrase *יֹשֵׁב בִּירוּשָׁלַם* in the present text parallels a similar phrase in 2 Samuel 5:6 *יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ* (which most translations render as “the inhabitants of the land”). This latter phrase is appositional to the gentilic noun phrase (more properly a substantive adjectival phrase) *הַיְבוּסִי* (“the Jebusite”), which has no gender or number in and of itself—these properties can be determined only by the context. I submit, then, that the plural rendition of this phrase as “inhabitants of the land” needs to be revised: the participle *יֹשֵׁב* is masculine singular. Therefore, the focus is on one person, namely, the king of the land—the Jebusite king of Jerusalem. When the Bible intends the plural (which is the most common form), it states it categorically (cf. Num 33:55; Jos 2:9; 9:3; Judg 10:18; and 1 Chr 22:18). Thus, in 2 Samuel 5, David had defeated the Jebusite king of Jerusalem but allowed the lame Mephibosheth live there. Just as the narrator in 1 Samuel had portrayed Saul as the new Philistine whose fight against David would amount to naught, Ziba now casts Mephibosheth as the new “inhabitant of Jerusalem”—the new Jebusite that David needs to dispossess.

The veracity of Ziba’s inculpation of Mephibosheth remains a bone of contention among biblical commentators. There are those, such as Eugene H. Peterson, who would rather gloss over it without dealing with it.<sup>20</sup> Such a stance is obscurantist, to say the least. Gordon, on the other hand, places serious doubts on Ziba’s verity on the basis of circumstantial evidence.<sup>21</sup> Alexander Francis Kirkpatrick outrightly calls it an audacious invention created by Ziba.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, it is nothing other than pure chicanery, which Ziba had contrived for expropriating Mephibosheth’s inheritance.

20. Peterson argues, “The storyteller doesn’t make it clear to us whether Ziba is telling the truth or making it up. Later, Mephibosheth will present a different version of what happened (2 Sam 19:24-30). But for now David believes Ziba, accepts his help and turns over all of Mephibosheth’s possessions to him. We do not have to decide whether Ziba is telling the truth or not to see that he is bent on using the David-Absalom crisis to his own advantage” (Eugene Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, Westminster Bible Companion, ed. Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999], 211).

21. Gordon observes that only a monumental miscalculation could have deluded Mephibosheth into imagining that the events of Absalom’s revolt would result in him, Mephibosheth, being crowned when indeed it was Absalom’s rebellion and for whose sake all Israel was amassing (*I & II Samuel*, 277).

22. *The Second Book of Samuel*, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, rev. ed. A. F. Kirkpatrick (London: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 368.

In his attempt to determine the candor of Ziba's statement, Meir Sternberg begins by outlining the compositional technique of repetition. He observes that there are three categories of members that constitute the fabric of repetition in the dynamic of the biblical plot. These three categories are forecast (prophecy, command, or scenario), enactment (performance, realization, or, rarely, state of affairs), and report (of the fulfillment of the "forecast" or "enactment").<sup>23</sup> He notes, however, that the order of this structure, which was the habitual format in ancient literature, is not always conformed to in biblical literature—modern literature does not conform to it either. Nevertheless, the structure of repetition, he writes, receives immunity from temporal displacement. Excepting prophetic messages, it seldom happens "that the utterance of a forecast or the occurrence of an event emerges only from a later scene of report. So much so that when the reader finds the natural order subverted, he is entitled to take it as a question mark about the reliability of the report or the reporting character. Given the unique norm, temporal comes to imply perspectival divergence."<sup>24</sup> When we apply this principle to Mephibosheth's speech reported here by Ziba without its antecedent occurrence, we are bound to read it as the narrator's compositional question mark on Ziba's reliability.

Ziba's reply excited and incited David enough that at the spur of the moment he spewed such a far-reaching verdict that it instantly disinherited Mephibosheth.<sup>25</sup> David's passionate emotion is conveyed in his employment of the emotive exclamatory particle  $\text{הנה}$  accompanied by a nominal sentence, very unlike David (compare this with 2 Samuel 9:9, where David returned Saul's estate to Mephibosheth).<sup>26</sup> In that flurry of

23. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 376. Explaining further, he writes, "The order in which the members appear usually reflects their chronological sequence: planning before performance, decree before fulfillment, action before its reporting as a thing of the past" (378).

24. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 379. One example that Sternberg gives of this phenomenon is Genesis 50:15-17, where Jacob's sons quote their father's speech without its prior occurrence in the narrative. Every reader of that text is inclined to understand it as the invention of Joseph's brothers, out of fear of possible retribution from their brother.

25. Hertzberg interprets Ziba's easy influence on David as a demonstration of how the latter's mistrust of the house of Saul had not really been banished from his innermost thoughts (*I & II Samuel*, 345). Kirkpatrick considers David's action in passing a verdict on Mephibosheth without an inquiry as both rash and hasty, and reflective of David's unreflecting impetuous character (*The Second Book of Samuel*, 368).

26. J. P. Fokkelman notes that both Ziba and Mephibosheth are introduced by *hinneh* (16:1b, 3d), and what connected them both (the land) is also

furious words, David consigned Saul's estate to Ziba. Ziba's reaction is as intriguing as the Davidic donation.<sup>27</sup> We have to remember that since we have met Ziba, he has never bowed to David. Now, in gratitude to David, the first word that came out of his mouth is *השתחויתי* ("I prostrate myself," v. 4). However, if one is prostrating one would scarcely need to mention that fact: it is more likely that Ziba bowed with his mouth than with his body.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Ziba's hauteur comes through, in spite of his smokescreen of phoniness, in his use of the first person pronominal suffix rather than the deferential third person pronoun that is the customary form of address to royalty in the ancient world. Then he continues with the usual courtly courtesies. The text displays a reversal of rhetorical preferences here: David, normally verbose, has now taken to terseness and the use of a nominal sentence, while Ziba, usually laconic and given to nominal sentences, has now employed two indicative verbs in this short discourse of six words.

The reversal of rhetorical preference between David and Ziba is symptomatic of the reversal of fates between David and Mephibosheth. David, who had previously danced and skipped into Jerusalem, now scurries out of town, while Mephibosheth, who had limped into the city previously, now remains in it. Similarly, David who would have loved to have remained in the city is forced out of it, whereas Mephibosheth, who was prepared to leave the city with David, is compelled to remain therein. We also note that David, who had undertaken to take care of Mephibosheth, now needed the care of the former caretakers of Mephibosheth (Ziba and Makir; cf. 2 Sam 16:1-2 and 17:27-29). All this presages the ultimate similarity of the fate of the house of David to that of the house of Saul, even though David's house received by far a better deal from Yahweh than the house of Saul.<sup>29</sup>

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now introduced with a *hinneh* (16:3d). See Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analyses* Vol. 1: King David (Sam 9–20 & Kings 1–2) (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 31.

27. Anderson observes that David's action in this passage "illustrates the use of the royal prerogative to confiscate land or property from an enemy or opponent and to give it to another person as a land-grant (cf. 9:7)" (2 *Samuel*, 205).

28. Fokkelman misses this point in his assumption that Ziba actually bows to David, when in sober truth there are no hints for such a supposition in the text. He writes, "This meeting concludes with Ziba's thanks. The man whom we did not see bow in A now bows indeed! His prostration occurs just when he is promoted to being a big landowner, and not before" (*Narrative Art*, 31).

29. Space and scope makes it difficult to explore this issue further.

### Mephibosheth and a Compromised David in 2 Samuel 19:25-31 (ET 24-30)

25 Then Mephibosheth son of Saul<sup>30</sup> came down to meet the king. Now he had not cared for his legs, neither did he trim his moustache; even his garments, he did not wash from the day the king went out to the day on which he returned in peace.

26 When<sup>31</sup> he came from<sup>32</sup> Jerusalem to meet the king, the king said to him, “Why did you not go with me, Mephibosheth?” 27 He replied, “O my lord the king, my steward betrayed me; for your servant had said to

30. Some medieval LXX manuscripts and the Syriac version have “son of Jonathan” (υιος Ιωναθαν and *br jwntan* respectively) before the MT’s “son of Saul.” These seem to be harmonistic in nature. P. Kyle McCarter suggests that the phrase “the son of Jonathan” was omitted as a result of haplography. He nevertheless leaves open the possibility for the originality of the MT rendition (P. Kyle McCarter, *2 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [New York: Doubleday, 1984], 417)

31. A few medieval manuscripts have  $\text{כִּי}$ , instead of  $\text{כֵּן}$ , as the circumstantial clause marker. This difference is not significant, as both words effectively mark the clause as circumstantial.

32. There is no prepositional prefix in the MT. The usual way of translating such a construction would have been to insert “to” rather than “from.” There are several places in the Hebrew Bible where the verb  $\text{בָּרַח}$  is used in conjunction with the preposition  $\text{כִּי}$ , either in a circumstantial or subordinate clause. I have identified three distinctive uses. The first is where they are used with a preposition that indicates direction, which always tends to be motion toward, rather than motion from, an object (cf. Exod 15:19; 1 Sam 26:3; and Jer 37:16). The second is where the two-word combination is used with a preposition prefixed to an infinitive construct to indicate purpose, which also at the same time has an implicit directional element that implies motion toward an object (1 Sam 26:15; 1 Chron 16:33; and Ps 96:13). Lastly, as in the case at hand, there are situations in which the word combination is used without an accompanying prepositional phrase, but a spatial directional motion toward an object is implied (Num 21:1; 1 Sam 23:7; 2 Sam 19:26; and 2 Chron 32:2). McCarter observes that only a few LXX minuscules support the reading “... *from* Jerusalem to meet the king;” which rendition he notes was nevertheless favored by both O. Thenius and J. Wellhausen (*II Samuel*, 417).

On the basis of the foregoing, then, we ought to insert the preposition “to” before Jerusalem. However, the context of this circumstantial clause demands a different approach. The context of 2 Sam 19:16-40 [ET 15-39] is at the Jordan River. After the men of Judah had given the king the green light to return, he came as far as the Jordan, where he was met by the men of Judah (v. 16), Shimei and the Benjiminites (vv. 16-17a), and Ziba and his entourage (vv. 17b-19). Then, at the end of the Jordan encounter episode, David converses with Barzillai, still at the Jordan, in verses 32-39. It is only after this latter conversation that we are told that the king crossed over to proceed to Jerusalem

him, ‘Saddle for me an ass,<sup>33</sup> that I will ride upon it and go with<sup>34</sup> the king’—for your servant is lame. 28 However, he slandered your servant to my lord the king; but my lord the king is like the angel of God. Let him do what is good in his eyes. 29 For my father’s entire<sup>35</sup> house was nothing but dead men before my lord the king, yet you have placed your servant among those who eat at your table. What right do I have anymore to still cry out to the king?”

30 Then the king said to him, “Why do you argue<sup>36</sup> your case further? I have decided:<sup>37</sup> you and Ziba will divide the estate.” 31 But Mephibosheth said to the king, “Let him even take everything, now that my lord the king has come be in peace to his throne.”<sup>38</sup> (Chapter 19:25-31, ET 24-30)

This narration of Mephibosheth’s interview with David is a part of the story about the king’s return from the latter’s self-imposed exile consequent to Absalom’s revolt. In this episode of the king’s return, the scene reporting Mephibosheth’s interview with the king contains

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via Gilgal (vv. 40-41). In between the first set of encounters and the last dialogue the king had with Barzillai is located his interview with Mephibosheth (vv. 25-31). Indeed, both the narrator’s and Mephibosheth’s use of the prepositional adverbial phrase “in peace” (בְּשָׁלוֹם) would be more appropriate if this encounter took place at the Jordan, prior to the new insurrection that arose when the king’s procession reached Gilgal. Clearly the pragmatic implication of this context is that Mephibosheth’s encounter with the king also took place at the Jordan River, hence we have inserted the preposition “from” before Jerusalem.

33. The ancient translations (the LXX, the Syriac and the Vulgate) have this clause in the 2ms imperative. It would make better sense if Mephibosheth had given orders for his ass to be saddled than for him to attempt to saddle it for himself, since he was crippled. Perhaps it is therefore possible that while he was dressing or waiting for Ziba to get his ass ready, the latter stole way to meet David in his own right.

34. Many medieval manuscripts have la (“to”) instead of ta (“with”). There is no substantial semantic difference.

35. Some medieval manuscripts have כָּל (“in all”) instead of the MT’s כָּל (“all”). The MT makes better grammatical sense in this case.

36. Literally, “to speak.” The judicial context of Mephibosheth’s defense warrants the more robust rendition.

37. Literally, “I have said,” but since the speech itself contains a new decision David has just reached coupled with the deliberative nature of the situation, it is better rendered as “I have decided.”

38. Literally, “house.” However, if our suggestion above that Mephibosheth met David at the Jordan River is correct, then the king had not yet reached his “house” (palace or even capital city) in the literal sense. However, his restoration to his throne was not in doubt. This interpretation is in consonance with the use of house, in word-play, in 2 Samuel 7 in reference to kingship (dynasty).



twice the number of words in the form of a direct discourse as does in narration.<sup>39</sup> This contrasts sharply with the previous passages we have dwelt with (ch. 9 and 16:1-4), where there is an almost one-to-one correspondence between direct discourse and narration. Fokkelman sees this as the narrator's way of tipping the scales in favor of Mephibosheth.<sup>40</sup> Mephibosheth not only speaks more than David, but also he has the final word. This, when taken in concert with the content of Mephibosheth's locution, is a possible signification of the higher moral ground (over and against David) from which he speaks.

As the people of Judah proceed to the Jordan River to welcome David, Shimei leads an entourage of a thousand warriors (which literally means "chosen men") from Benjamin to tender his apology to the king. Ziba comes along with his household to bring the king across the river. At the Jordan River crossing, Barzillai and his associates stand to bid the king farewell. It is in the midst of the enumeration of these welcoming and farewell parties that Mephibosheth is also listed.

In giving the account of Mephibosheth's encounter with David, the narrator first gives a background account of how Mephibosheth had conducted himself in the absence of the monarch (with a *waw*-disjunctive construction). From the day David had fled Jerusalem until the day he returned, Mephibosheth had completely neglected all the rules of personal hygiene—he never had a bath, trim his moustache, nor wash his garments. Mephibosheth compensated for his inability to share in the king's risk from enemies by placing his health at risk—for instance, he adopted the customary forms of mourning for a rather extended period of time.<sup>41</sup>

39. Fokkelman gives the ratio of words in direct discourse and narration in this episode as 83:42. See his *Narrative Art*, 23.

40. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 23.

41. Robert D. Bergen, commenting on 2 Samuel 19:24, writes, "Mephibosheth's appearance during his audience with the king also was considerably more unflattering: 'he had not taken care of his feet or trimmed his mustache or washed his clothes from the day the king left' Jerusalem until that day. Such inattention to details of personal health and hygiene made Mephibosheth look as if he had been profoundly mourning for a considerable period of time—he certainly did not look like a pretender to the throne who had been actively attempting to take back his grandfather's kingdom (cf. 16:3)" (Robert D. Bergen, *The New American Commentary 1, 2 Samuel* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996], 430). Expanding on the modes of mourning in ancient Israel, John Mauchline writes, "This neglect of personal care was practiced in various ways during occasions of mourning (cf. 2 Sam 12:20; 14:2); other practices were to shave the hair and beard (cf. Job 1:20; Jer 16:6; 41:5; 47:5; etc.), to wear sackcloth and cast earth on the head (1 Sam 4:12; Job 2:12; Neh 9:1); and to sit or lie on an ash-heap (Isa 58:5; Jer 6:26; and Ezek

There are different scholarly stances on the narrator's account of Mephibosheth's conduct in David's absence. While an overwhelming majority of scholars see it as a proof of his loyalty to David, a few read it as being pretentious. J. Kirsch, for example, compares Mephibosheth's conduct to that of David before Achish the Philistine king of Gath (1 Sam 21:14).<sup>42</sup> Halpern makes a case for Mephibosheth's loyalty to David. He, however, argues for the possibility that Mephibosheth's disheveled veneer—which he presents as a proof of his mourning for the king—could as well have been presented as his self-effacement before Absalom in the desire that vengeance be visited on David for decimating his family.<sup>43</sup> Ackroyd, similarly, likening Mephibosheth's conduct to the dissimulations of the Gibeonites in the conquest era of Joshua, asks quizzically, "Can we be sure that Mephibosheth was not being similarly astute?"<sup>44</sup> Views such as these fail to reckon with the diversity of rhetorical strands that a narrator weaves into the fabric of a narrative. Mephibosheth, in his speech before David, made no reference to his appearance. Rather, it is the narrator who, in his discursive comment, draws the reader's attention to Mephibosheth's act of mourning. It is, therefore, unfair to ascribe such sinister motives to Mephibosheth's well-intentioned devotion.

Contrary to the preceding views on Mephibosheth's appearance, Fokkelman sees it as proof of his integrity and shows how Mephibosheth's immaterial *hesed* sincerely responds to David's *hesed* toward him as it stands in contrast to Ziba's material *hesed*. This, he believes, completely belies the charge of treason that Ziba had leveled against Mephibosheth.<sup>45</sup> Sternberg likewise highlights the significance of Mephibosheth's conduct coming from the narrator. He thus sees it as a vindication of the reader's distrust of Ziba and a proof of Mephibosheth's loyalty to David.<sup>46</sup> Vargon

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27:30)." See John Mauchline, *1 and 2 Samuel*, New Century Bible (Greenwood: Marshall, Morgan & Scott Ltd., 1971), 292.

42. Jonathon Kirsch, *King David: The Real Life of the Man Who Ruled Israel* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000), 254; as quoted in Jeremy Schipper, "'Why Do You Still Speak of Your Affairs?' Polyphony in Mephibosheth's Exchanges with David in 2 Samuel" *Vestus Testamentum* 54:3 (2004): 344-351. See especially page 345, note 5.

43. David's Secret Demons, 50.

44. Peter A. Ackroyd, *The Second Book of Samuel*, Cambridge Bible Commentaries on the New English Bible (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 181.

45. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 32.

46. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 380.

even goes a little further in reading the narrator's comments here as a subtle critique of David.<sup>47</sup>

In between these two extremes are those who seek to avoid a commitment on the matter either way and those who strive for a nuanced position. Conroy understands the narrator's failure to make a categorical judgment on either Ziba or Mephibosheth as a subdued way of showing that both of them are worthy of the reader's disdain.<sup>48</sup> Jeremy Schipper similarly sees more complexity than clarity in the whole episode. He insists that the textual evidence does not reveal any clues to assist a reader in ascertaining Mephibosheth's truthfulness.<sup>49</sup> While Peterson acknowledges that Mephibosheth's looks belie Ziba's claim that Mephibosheth is a dynastic pretender anticipating a personal coronation, he suggests that there is a deliberate withholding of a verdict so as to set David's response in bold relief. His view is:

[As David listens,] he knows that both stories cannot be true. Here the narrative takes us into new territory: David doesn't care who is telling the truth. There is no cross-examination, no calling in of witnesses. David accepts both men, Ziba and Mephibosheth, back into his city. His love is large enough, expansive enough, to handle faithlessness, fecklessness, lies, and hypocrisy. David does not insist on having a 'pure church.'<sup>50</sup> Peterson's pastoral concerns trump his better exegetical judgment. He leaps to appropriation, completely bypassing the prior step of explication wherein one necessarily explores the world of the text. The foregoing skepticism notwithstanding, a close reading of the text does find clear clues that would inform the reader's exegetical endeavor.

As we take a closer look at Mephibosheth's speech, we ask how Sternberg's theory of repetition in the structure of plot dynamic applies here. There is no antecedent enactment of Mephibosheth's speech to Ziba, which he now reports to David (19:27-29, ET v. 26-28). If we follow Sternberg's pattern of argumentation superficially, then, Mephibosheth can be construed as being downright mendacious. However, this situation is ameliorated by the narrator's prior positive report on Mephibosheth (19:25, ET v. 24). It is against the template of the

47. "At first sight, the narrator does not criticize David directly, but there is implied criticism of his deeds" ("The Blind and the Lame," 507).

48. Conroy, *Absalom*, 106.

49. Schipper, "'Why Do You Still Speak of Your Affairs?'" 346. Along the same lines, Anderson concludes that considering all the available data, "in the end we are unable to decide with any certainty as to who told the truth" (Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 238).

50. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 232.

narrator's positive perspective on Mephibosheth that the latter's speech ought to be read, in which case he is to be understood as being veridical.

Probing further into his speech, we note the use Mephibosheth makes of a key Hebrew word, רמה (to “deceive,” “deal treacherously with,” or to “betray;”<sup>51</sup> 2 Sam 19:27, ET v. 26) vis-à-vis its use in other places in Samuel and indeed elsewhere in the biblical text. In both of the other instances where the same word is used in Samuel, actual deceit is involved. The first instance involves Michal's deceit of her father, which allowed David to escape (1 Sam 19:17), and the second involved Saul's deceit of the witch of Endor so she could vaticinate for him by her necromancy (1 Sam 28:12).<sup>52</sup> It is, therefore, natural to expect that the third use of the word in Samuel should also involve actual deceit. Besides, we observe that in all these three instances, the deceit involves Saulides, and the outcome of the deceit is also detrimental to them. Additionally, in all these instances the deceiver stands in a relationship of trust to the deceived. Thus, there is no sufficient ground to doubt that Ziba had acted perfidiously toward Mephibosheth.

In his refutation of Ziba, Mephibosheth employed an epithet in reference to David that is used elsewhere in the books of Samuel as well, namely, the king is like *an angel of God* (וַאֲדָנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ כַּמַּלְאֲכַי הַאֱלֹהִים, v. 28, ET v. 27). The same phrase was used by the wise woman of Tekoa, who stood proxy for Joab (1 Sam 14:17, 20). In addition, the Philistine king Achish of Gath had also used the same expression in reference to David (1 Sam 29:9). In noting the occurrence of this phrase in 2 Samuel 14, Schipper proceeds to also compare Mephibosheth with the Tekoite and concludes,

In v. 28b, he says to David, “my lord the king is like the angel of God (*kml'k h'llhym*).” Again, one again hears traces of texts involving deception and disloyalty. In 2 Sam. xiv 20, the wise woman of Tekoa compares David's wisdom to the wisdom of “the angel of God” (*ml'k h'llhym*) when she asks David to judge her fictitious dispute with her family. This intersection with a text in which David is deceived when called upon to make a judgment subtly introduces the possibility that Mephibosheth is being less than sincere. His constant use of self-abasing speech actually reveals very little to the reader about his motives or his truthfulness.<sup>53</sup>

51. BDB, 941.

52. For further use of רמה in the Hebrew Bible see Genesis 3:13; 29:25; Joshua 9:22; Lamentation 1:19; Obadiah 1:7; Job 13:7; 27:4; Psalm 78:57; 101:7; and Hosea 7:16.

53. Schipper, “Why Do You Still Speak of Your Affairs?” 350. In a similarly flawed analysis, Schipper wrongly compares 2 Samuel 19:26 (ET

Schipper's comparison of Mephibosheth to the Tekoite woman is flawed: that the Tekoite presented her case in a concealed form cannot be called deception as it is a common rhetorical tool also used by the prophets to bring about a rude awakening in their audience at the punch line for maximum rhetorical effect (cf. 2 Sam 12:1-7; 1 Kgs 20:35-42). Additionally, the use of the figure of speech ("the angel of the God") in chapter 14 was devised by a loyalist, Joab, working for the good of the king—so that he may bring back the son the king loved and missed badly (cf. 2 Sam 13:39–14:3). On a similar note, the intentions toward the king, which the narrator apparently ascribes to Mephibosheth right from the beginning of the scene, are good ones.

Contrary to Schipper's suggestion, I envisage that both passages highlight David's weakness in failing in each case to reach the crux of the matter at stake. David, as Yahweh's anointed, was certainly the messenger of God (recall the endowment of the Spirit that he received in 1 Samuel 16), and as such was expected to be capable of deciphering truth from falsehood. In both cases he showed a colossal want of sagacity and the attendant ability to fathom the matter at hand. In the case of the Tekoite, the concern was with the restoration of the king's estranged son and his installation as the heir, in order to avert imminent danger to Yahweh's heritage (2 Sam 14:4-13). David went only halfway in bringing Absalom back without installing him as the heir to the throne, the act that was the crux of the Tekoite (Joab's) petition (2 Sam 14:7, 16). In like manner, with respect to Mephibosheth, where the same figure of

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25) with 16:17—the passages deal with the questions asked respectively to Mephibosheth and Hushai by David and Absalom. He then equates Mephibosheth's answer with Hushai's deception (349–50). However, that kind of approach takes literary artistry to absurdity. Such a comparison has to be anchored in more than just one apparent similarity. The disparities between these two passages are too grave to be overlooked. First of all, in the case of Hushai, it is the narrator who clearly states that David had planted the former in Absalom's camp to undermine the rebellion. No such categorical statement anywhere in the literature imputes ulterior motives to Mephibosheth. Secondly, in the case of Hushai, the structure of the communication is quite different. There the question is being asked of an interlocutor about his loyalty to a third party, while here in the case of Mephibosheth, the question is set in an I-thou context; we note also that in this case, unlike in the former, the integrity of the second party has been asseverated by the narrator's favorable comments on him. Finally, in the case of Hushai, there already exists an antecedent case of a loyalist deserter in David's cabinet (Ahithophel) to make Absalom trust Hushai; in the case of Mephibosheth there is no agreement between his conduct (and speech) and the behavior of his antecedent (Ziba), neither does his conduct square up with his alleged crime. This makes the need to determine the truth even more urgent than ever, a need which David completely overlooks.

speech is used, David fails to grasp the heart of matter, now that he has both Ziba and Mephibosheth at hand. Furthermore, in 2 Samuel 14:1-3, the prelude to the usage of this sobriquet is a pretended mourning that is meant to work for David's good (since his heart was yearning for Absalom). Similarly, in 2 Samuel 19:25, prior to the usage of this epithet, there is an actual mourning concerning the well-being of David.

Additionally, Mephibosheth, in his speech, deftly paints a telling picture of the precarious position in which Ziba had placed him now. He states that all the members of his father's house were condemned men before David when the latter chose to spare his life (2 Sam 19:29, ET v. 28).<sup>54</sup> This simple statement serves both to allude to David's complicity in the murder of the<sup>55</sup> Saulide Seven (ch. 21)<sup>56</sup> and to explain Mephibosheth's own terror when he first appeared before David (ch. 9). Mephibosheth acknowledges that he has no legal right to claim before David because he was implicated by Ziba; he would have had to consider his pedigree in the fated house of Saul (and the death sentence passed on them, as he perceives things); and he would have also had to consider the ancient Near Eastern custom of decimating the male members of a deposed dynasty.<sup>57</sup> He then leaves the matter with David, allowing him to decide as he wills.

54. The Hebrew phrase Mephibosheth employs, *twm yvna*, literally translates as "men of death," that is, men who are given over to death. In other words, they are condemned men. This presupposes some kind of sentence to that effect issued by some authority figure. The authority figure may be one invested with legal authority (cf. 1 Sam 20:31; 2 Sam 12:5; and 1 Kgs 2:26). The sentence may also be issued by someone without stately authority but possessing violent power, such as when a rebel leader pronounces a death sentence on rival elements or defectors, or the sort of *fatwa* that fundamentalist terrorists issue for the death of their enemies (cf. 1 Sam 26:16). In either case the person making the pronouncement has either the authority or the capability to execute it. When all the biblical passages cited here are taken into consideration, one is left in no doubt that Mephibosheth alludes to a scheme orchestrated, on David's watch, to eliminate Saulide contenders to the throne of Israel.

55. The Saulide Seven is my term for Saul's two sons and five grandsons that were murdered in Gibeon as authorized by David (cf. 2 Sam 21:1-9).

56. Kirkpatrick understands Mephibosheth to be suggesting that David might have put all the members of Saul's house to death. He also connects this statement with the incident in 2 Samuel 21:6-9 (Kirkpatrick, *The Second Book of Samuel*, 395).

57. The term used here is צדקה, which is usually rendered as "righteousness." Underlining the term, however, is the concept of an established norm of just order for regulating conduct, both in the larger society and for individuals, whether in the sacred realm (with emphasis on morality and conduct) or in secular affairs (stressing integrity and justice in the marketplace, in the polity,

David's response to Mephibosheth is as puzzling as was his response to Ziba. Certainly, David's actions both in chapter 16 and chapter 19 do not present him as one who dispensed justice to the nation, as the Torah requires. His hasty dispensing with Mephibosheth's case smacks of an uneasy conscience recoiling from confrontation with the naked truth.

Biblical commentators have struggled over time to find some explanation for David's untoward action in this case. K. Budde supposes that regal dignity would not allow David to eat up his words, so he made only a partial retreat.<sup>58</sup> Kirkpatrick suggests three possible reasons why David was content with a compromise verdict. He was either suspicious of the truthfulness of Mephibosheth's story; he was unwilling to alienate Ziba (and possibly a large contingent of Benjaminites) by revoking the grant he had given to Ziba; or it could just have been a confirmation of the initial lease arrangement.<sup>59</sup> I find all the reasons unsatisfactory. First of all, if he was not sure of the truth of the matter, it was incumbent

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or in the court). When used, especially but not exclusively, in combination with *jpvm* as a hendiadys (or word pair), *hqdc* signifies an inherent requirement for conformity to an established norm (cf. Lev 19:36; Deut 1:16-17; 25:13-16; Job 8:3; Ps 94:15; and Jer 22:12). To the person who stands to benefit from this norm, it is a right to be claimed. Conversely, there is an implicit duty placed upon the person who is in the position to make the conformity to such an established norm possible (for instance, it is incumbent upon a judge to ensure that justice is dispensed without fear or favor, cf. Lev 19:15; Deut 16:18-20; and Prov 31:9). This is what, in today's parlance, is termed human rights. It is this that Mephibosheth, in his predicament, disclaims before the monarch. For similar positions, see Kirkpatrick, *The Second Book of Samuel*, 396; Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 291; and Ackroyd, *The Second Book of Samuel*, 181-82.

58. K. Budde, *Die Bücher Samuel* (Tübingen and Leipzig: KAT, 1902), 292; as quoted in Shmuel Vargon, "The Blind and the Lame," *VT* 46 (1996): 508, note 29.

59. Kirkpatrick, *The Second Book of Samuel*, 299. For others who similarly account for David's action on the basis of either his distrust of Mephibosheth or his inability to decipher the truth, see Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 291; and Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 238.

Payne makes the distinction between the perspectives of the narrator and that of David: "It is clear that the biblical writer believed his story, but it is not so clear that David did" (*I & II Samuel*, 251). He nevertheless excuses David, unconvincingly, on the account of the loyalty of Ziba, adding that David may have had the desire of not visiting reprisal on anyone. I find McCarter's comments on the matter puzzling. He writes, "David settles this contest of obsequiousness by declaring it a draw" (*II Samuel*, 424). The affairs of the state, and especially the administration of justice, are of such a serious nature that is reprehensible if they are attended to as if one were a judge in some comic TV reality show.

upon him as the ultimate judge of the land to search this matter out and arrive at the truth (Deut 13:13-16, ET vv. 12-15; 17:2-5; cf. 1 Kgs 3:16-28; Prov 25:2; Ezra 4:19; 5:17; 6:1; and Job 29:16). Second, there is no evidence to suggest that Ziba had such a following in Benjamin that pitching him against the grandson of Saul (Israel's popular king), the Benjaminites would have preferred Ziba over Saul's heir. Third, lease arrangements are not coterminous with inheritance rights. This is even more so in Israel's covenant context, where land holdings, as a fief from Yahweh, were never to be permanently alienated from the family. The issue, therefore, is not that David could not get to the truth but that he would not. All that notwithstanding, Mephibosheth still comes through with integrity and dignity, showing himself standing tall on a higher moral plane than either Ziba or David; he shows that he valued his relationship to his sovereign over and above property.

There are clues in the text on how to assess the ethics of David's actions in this matter. There is a striking similarity to the narrator's stance on David in this passage and that of 2 Samuel 3. In the events of chapter 3, David's motives are not clearly stated. However, the narrator's intimation that people were doing things that were "good in the eyes" of others or one another hints at the ethical perspective in which they were to be viewed: there was a movement toward expediency instead of a drive to the divine will. The same pattern resurfaces here with the use of the concern with people doing things that were "good in the eyes of David" and David doing things that were either good in his own eyes or in the eyes of others (2 Sam 19:19, 28, 38, 39; ET vv. 18, 27, 37, 38). In this passage, as in the other, expediency tramples propriety. It is fascinating that David, in despair and at the nadir of his reign during Absalom's rebellion, sought what is good in Yahweh's eyes (2 Sam 15:26). Yet, in his moment of triumph, others seek what is good in his eyes and he himself seeks what is good in the eyes of others: he cares less about what is good in the eyes of Yahweh now.<sup>60</sup>

David's "resolution" of the seeming stalemate in the conflict between the testimonies of Mephibosheth and Ziba without attempting to get to the bottom of the matter (2 Sam 19:30) contrasts sharply with the approach taken by Solomon to fathom the stalemate of a similarly, if not even more, complex nature (1 Kgs 3:16-27). David's solution only approximates Solomon's heuristic device for discovering the truth

60. This pattern identified here compares well with David's conduct in the HDR. Throughout the early stages of the HDR David constantly sought after the divine will, but toward the end of the HDR (at his ascendancy to Israel's throne) the preoccupation was with what was pleasing to human beings (either David or other Israelites).



of the situation. While Solomon pursued the truth when faced with similar circumstances, David only employed *volte-face* diplomacy to dispense speedily with the situation at hand. The similarity between Mephibosheth's concluding remarks and that of the true mother of the living son in 1 Kings 3 sets in bold relief the difference in the judgments of the two kings.

### Conclusion

Reflecting over these accounts of David's dealings with the sole surviving male Saulide during the Absalom revolt (2 Sam 16:1-4; 19:25-31), we observe how the three crucial founding motifs of the Israelites as a people (blessing, progeny, and land) play out in Saul's family. The decimation of Saul's progeny in the earlier and latter part of Samuel (chs. 3, 4, and 21) indicates that it is the curse, rather than the blessing, that is operative in Saul's house. It leaves one wondering if the memory of Saul's name will survive in Israel. The mention of Mephibosheth's son, Micha (2 Sam 9:12), as a kind of remnant, serves as an intimation that Saul's name will not be completely cut off from among his people. The restoration of his estate to his grandson (2 Sam 9:7, 9) also provides a ray of hope and footing for Saul's progeny to be planted amongst his own people in the tribe of Benjamin. King David's (re)confiscation of Saul's estate (2 Sam 16:4) shows the precarious existence of Saul's progeny *vis-à-vis* the ironic fugacity of Davidic *hesed* in the intensity of succession politics.

The decimation of Saul's family and the confiscation of his family land holdings evince the dominant operative force of retribution. Whether it accrues from Yahweh's curse or Davidic vendetta is another question entirely. At the same time, the presence of a remnant (however insignificant) in Saul's house, coupled with the grudging return of half of the estate to Mephibosheth (2 Sam 19:30), indicates that Yahweh would not completely wipe out Saul's family. Indeed, even in Samuel's prophetic diatribes against Saul, only the kingship was to be taken away from him; he said nothing of Saul's loss of progeny (1 Sam 13:13-14; 15:26-28). Even at the shrine of the Endorite witch, though Samuel said Saul would die with his sons (1 Sam 28:15-19), there was no indication that it was to be a perpetual annihilation of his house as the case was with the house of Eli (cf. 2 Sam 2:31-35 and 3:11-14). This is why it becomes questionable whether or not divine retribution against Saul extended beyond those who died with him in the Philistine war. In view of all this, we are inclined to agree with David Polzin that Mephibosheth, "the one still left in Jonathan's house, is a living reminder of David's complicity—whether justified or not—in transforming Saul's house into

a barren establishment, and his own pact with Jonathan into a broken covenant.”<sup>61</sup>

Thus, David’s drive to establish himself upon the throne of Israel and to ensure the perpetuity of his dynasty trumped all covenantal commitments. Consequently, all the requirements of the law for the dispensing of justice in the covenant community were ignored by David. First, David withheld the right to fair hearing from Mephibosheth contrary to the law’s requirement (Deut 1:17; 19:16-17; cf. Prov 18:13; and John 7:51). Second, Mephibosheth was hastily indicted without prior investigation of his alleged offense as required by the law (Deut 13:14; 17:4; and 19:18). Third, there was no authentication of the case against him by the testimony of two or three witnesses—the Deuteronomic Code’s requirement for criminal cases to be proven beyond reasonable doubt (Deut 19:15; 17:6; Num 35:30; cf. 2 Cor 13:1; and 1 Tim 5:19). Finally, the king’s verdict was tainted by the graft with which the plaintiff (Ziba) had laden the king, a direct contravention of the provisions of the law (Deut 16:19; 27:25; cf. Exod 23:8; and Isa 1:23).

For a true socio-religious transformation of our society, we must labor for justice in our society—beginning within the church itself. This process begins with the individual, who must not see the struggle for succession to whatever position as a life-and-death matter. At the larger societal level, we will have to work at strengthening the institutions that make obtaining enforceable justice in society possible and affordable to all without excepting anyone because of his/her pedigree or social status (such as being an orphan, poor, human rights activist, or an opposition politician).

61. David Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist: 2 Samuel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 100.