

SHINING THE LAMP: THE RHETORIC OF 2 SAMUEL 5–24

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Summary

2 Samuel 5–24 is here read as a literary unit that covers the whole of the reign of David over Israel and Judah. It is argued that there is an intentional rhetorical pattern that is evident in the literary structure of these chapters, and that the aim of the whole section is to suggest a positive assessment of the whole of David's reign. This assessment is directed towards the exiles, offering hope because of the continuing validity of the promises to David.

Introduction

One matter of which readers and interpreters of the Second book of Samuel could be reasonably sure over the years was that chapters 9–20 would be read as a more or less continuous story. Even if not very many were convinced of his suggested starting point, it can be fairly said that Rost's theory of a Throne Succession Narrative¹ was more or less the dominant model of reading these chapters. As is well known, Rost sought to start from the narrative's conclusion, according to him 1 Kings 1–2, and work back from that point to demonstrate that the goal towards which the narrative was moving was the justification of Solomon being David's successor. Having found his key in the conclusion, Rost sought to show how the earlier material was always moving in that direction. The influence of Rost's interpretation can be seen in the fact that even Martin Noth in his equally important *The Deuteronomistic History* was content to refer to 2 Samuel 9–20 as a

¹ L. Rost, *The Succession to the Throne of David* (Sheffield: Almond, 1982; German original 1926).

‘traditional story of David’ and thus not make a significant effort to integrate it into his overall thesis.²

Recently, however, we have seen something of an unravelling of the general support for Rost’s thesis, and a move back towards a fragmentary theory for explaining the origins of the books of Samuel.³ As indicated, there were always doubts about the ways in which Rost wanted to include 2 Samuel 6 in his interpretation, but a reading from chapter 9 at least seemed secure.⁴ But Conroy has sought to show that chapters 13–20 are not dependent upon what goes before,⁵ whilst Bailey has built upon this in order to treat the Bathsheba–Uriah material as something essentially independent of the main narrative,⁶ one in which the adultery and subsequent marriage of David and Bathsheba has been logically displaced since, he argues, it most likely occurred after the Absalom revolt, and has only been secondarily integrated into its present position by the Deuteronomists. In addition, other scholars have been less than impressed by Rost’s suggestion that the goal of the whole narrative is to show how Solomon became king, and all to the greater glory of Solomon.⁷ Thus, David Gunn is able to show that the *Tendenz* required to demonstrate this position is by no means clear,⁸ and that there is indeed a great deal in these chapters in which no succession theme is obviously present. Peter Ackroyd was likewise able to show that there are considerably more themes present in these chapters than simply that of succession, and indeed some of them appear to be anti-Solomonic,⁹ hardly helpful material to leave in a document that aimed to justify Solomon’s accession to the throne.

² M. Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (2nd edn.; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991; German original 1943), 55–56.

³ NB the critique of J.W. Flanagan, ‘Court History or Succession Document? A Study of 2 Samuel 9–20 and 1 Kings 1–2’, *JBL* 91 (1972) 172–81.

⁴ So, e.g., R.N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative: A Study of II Samuel 9–20; I Kings 1 and 2* (London: SCM, 1968), J.A. Wharton, ‘A Plausible Tale: Story and Theology in II Samuel 9–20, I Kings 1–2’, *Int.* 35 (1981) 341–44.

⁵ C.C. Conroy, *Absalom! Absalom! Narrative and Language in 2 Samuel 13–20* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1978).

⁶ R.C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10–12* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).

⁷ Rost, *Succession*, 105, memorably describes the narrative as ‘in majorem gloriam Salomonis’.

⁸ D.M. Gunn, *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978), 21ff.

⁹ P.R. Ackroyd, ‘The Succession Narrative (So Called)’, *Int.* 35 (1981) 388ff.

Although it might be going too far to suggest that we have passed through a paradigm shift¹⁰ in terms of the dominant model in understanding these chapters, it is certainly true to say that the critical orthodoxy that had governed the reading of these chapters has broken down. If the shift has not taken place, then scholars are certainly looking for new ways in which to read these chapters.

Associated with this shift has been an increasing level of interest in the so-called ‘appendix’ to the book of 2 Samuel, chapters 21–24. For most readers committed to the older orthodoxy, these chapters constituted a block of material that had for some reason been placed within the succession narrative, material that could not be fitted in elsewhere but which tradition dictated still needed to be recorded. Although Karl Budde had pointed out the carefully structured literary pattern of these chapters as early as 1902¹¹ it did not affect the dominant approach, where these chapters were ‘treated primarily as a miscellany without intentional or substantive connection to the preceding books of Samuel’.¹² Although Gordon has briefly touched on the significance of these chapters,¹³ it is Walter Brueggemann who has tried to unpack the significance of the so-called appendix as an intentionally placed text, and specifically one that seeks to undercut the royal pretensions of David that he believes were established by chapters 5–8 of 2 Samuel.¹⁴ Chapters 21–24, he argues, take us away from royal pretensions of power, and back to a more tribally based concept of rulership.

I believe that Brueggemann has opened up a great deal that is significant for our understanding of chapters 21–24, and would highlight his attempt to link them to chapters 5–8 as something that is of vital importance. In particular, I would want to suggest that the use of the lists of David’s officials in both 2 Samuel 8:15ff. and 20:23ff. represents a deliberate structuring device that invites the reader to see that there is a shift taking place within the story of David that is being

¹⁰ R.F. Shedinger, ‘Kuhnian Paradigms and Biblical Studies: Is Biblical Studies a Science?’, *JBL* 119/3 (2000) 453–71, has criticised the use of the term ‘paradigm shift’ because Biblical studies has not undergone the sort of changes that are consistent with the arguments of Kuhn. Shedinger’s point is well taken, but popular usage suggests that Kuhnian precision is not always intended.

¹¹ K. Budde, *Die Bücher Samuel erklärt* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1902), 304.

¹² B.C. Birch, ‘1 & 2 Samuel’, in L.E. Keck, ed., *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 1355.

¹³ R.P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 45.

¹⁴ W. Brueggemann, *Power, Providence, and Personality: Biblical Insights into Life and Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 86–115.

narrated, and that these lists form the bridges between the various units.¹⁵ However, I am unconvinced by his suggestion that the so-called appendix is really that critical of David, at least in comparison with chapters 5–8. There are criticisms of David in chapters 21–24, but Murray has also shown a degree of criticism of David in chapters 5–7.¹⁶ For reasons that will be outlined below, I would wish to include 2 Samuel 8 in the stretch of text analysed by Murray, but his general conclusions do not stand or fall on this point. Rather, the inclusion of chapter 8 will be seen to fill out some of his conclusions about what Yahweh is doing with David in 2 Samuel 7. An even more critical view of David has been espoused by Lyle Eslinger,¹⁷ so it becomes apparent that the reading of David's reign that Brueggemann is suggesting is being opposed by 2 Samuel 21–24 may also be opposed, to some extent at least, by 2 Samuel 5–8. Thus, Brueggemann may be setting these texts over against one another when, in their final form, they are actually seeking to serve a complementary purpose.

Bringing the points made so far to a conclusion, it becomes apparent that we are in a state of flux concerning the right way to read the story of David in 2 Samuel 5–24. That chapters 9–20 constitute a succession narrative is by no means clear. The so-called appendix in chapters 21–24 may turn out to be more tightly integrated than has previously been considered, whilst chapters 5–8 may not represent quite as triumphal a view of David as was previously thought. In all then, it seems appropriate to suggest an alternative reading of 2 Samuel 5–24, one that seeks to consider its rhetoric as it seeks to persuade readers about the reign of David. Although Gunn would wish to include 2 Samuel 2–4,¹⁸ there are important structural reasons in terms of the architecture of 2 Samuel 5–24 that suggest that it has a unity of its own. In particular, the fact that these are the chapters that deal with David's reign over Israel and Judah, whereas in chapters 2–4 he is king of Judah alone, would indicate some degree of thematic difference. 1 Kings 1 is also excluded because it is at this point that the succession theme is directly introduced, and the end of David's

¹⁵ One might call them 'Janus lists' because of the way in which they both close off the preceding narrative sections and lead into that which follows.

¹⁶ D.F. Murray, *Divine Prerogative and Royal Pretension: Pragmatics, Poetics and Polemics in a Narrative Sequence about David (2 Samuel 5:17–7:29)* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

¹⁷ L. Eslinger, *House of God or House of David: The Rhetoric of 2 Samuel 7* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994).

¹⁸ Gunn, *The Story of King David*, 66ff.

reign here is really presented as the introduction to Solomon's reign. 2 Samuel 21–24 has provided a closing summary on David's reign so that 1 Kings 1–2 can introduce us to that of Solomon. Indeed, it would seem quite likely that 1 Kings 1–2 is an independent composition, though one that is fully aware of the contents of 2 Samuel 9–20.¹⁹ All of this suggests that succession was not the topic about which these chapters were composed. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that they want to persuade readers of something. Since rhetoric is best understood as that which is used to persuade, it is appropriate that we attend to the rhetoric of these chapters.

Guides to the Rhetoric of 2 Samuel 5–24

In examining the rhetoric of 2 Samuel 5–24 it is important to begin by noting that we are not concerned to apply the classical Greek handbooks on rhetoric to the text since there is no evidence that these were understood and used in Israel. Of course, there may well be points where, in the attempt to persuade, Old Testament literature uses techniques described in the handbooks, but the narratives in the books of Samuel do not show any evidence of a studied use of the handbooks. Closer to home with these texts, Eslinger has attempted to demonstrate that the four stage method of rhetorical criticism developed by Kennedy for the New Testament is also applicable to the Old,²⁰ an approach that he applies specifically to 2 Samuel 7. Kennedy's four stages are:

1. Defining the rhetorical unit
2. Defining the situation that elicited the piece
3. Deciding on the 'species' of rhetoric
4. Analysing its structural and rhetorical devices

The argument so far defines our unit as 2 Samuel 5–24, a text that I am proposing to read against the background of the exile. Although the text records traditions that are considerably older than the exile, it was in the exile that the text that we currently know finally took shape, a shape that was partly determined by the larger context in which it is now found. The 'species' of rhetoric is somewhat harder to determine, though I would suggest that we regard 'story' as its own

¹⁹ Cf. P Kyle McCarter, "'Plots True or False': The Succession Narrative as Court Apologetic", *Int.* 35 (1981) 361–62.

²⁰ Eslinger, *House of God*, 4.

form of rhetoric. In terms of the structural and rhetorical devices I want to highlight two key issues. First, we need to consider the use of balancing chiasms either side of 2 Samuel 9–20, chiasms that are linked to these chapters by the use of Janus lists of David's officials. Second, we need to consider those points where the author's own voice is directly employed in the telling of the narrative, those points where the narrative voice directly intrudes.²¹ These two issues are central to the rhetorical concerns of the passage. From this we will attempt to demonstrate that the account of David's reign is structured to persuade readers that the events described in 2 Samuel 9–20 are an aberration within a reign that is generally to be regarded as good, and that within this context David is to be considered as having been punished in full within his own reign. That is not to suggest that these narrative units lack any criticism of David, but the criticisms address areas of weakness within a generally positive portrayal of David. Thus, although we see David pushing for power, Gerbrandt's assessment is largely correct, and he is portrayed in a positive light because, in the final analysis, he chooses submission to the reign of Yahweh.²² David's reign is to be viewed positively because in this way Yahweh can be seen to be with him throughout his reign, and it is the presence of Yahweh, rather than David's ethical character, that is of decisive significance.

Unlike Eslinger, however, we are concerned here with the rhetoric of the final compiler, and not the rhetoric that is embedded within the text. That is to say, although the rhetorical swordplay that he detects between Yahweh and David in 2 Samuel 7 is of considerable interest, it remains to be demonstrated that this represents the final compiler's intention.²³ A synchronic reading of the text's rhetoric must retain its focus on the intentions of the final compiler, and thus attend to the

²¹ In terms of the suggestions of M.C.A. Korpel, 'Structural Analysis as a Tool for Redaction Criticism', *JSOT* 69 (1996) 69ff., I am concerned with the macrostructures and not the detail of the microstructures.

²² G.E. Gerbrandt, *Kingship According to the Deuteronomistic History* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1986), 158ff. Gerbrandt's Mennonite background comes to the fore in his insistence that David 'allows Yahweh to be Israel's defender' (p. 173). Although this is to some extent true, it tends to ignore the fact that David was also responsible for the development of a standing army, including special units such as the Cherethites and Pelethites.

²³ Such a reading, though without formal attention to rhetoric, is offered by D.J. McCarthy, 'II Samuel 7 and the Structure of the Deuteronomistic History', *JBL* 84 (1965) 131–38.

rhetoric of the text as we now find it, and not at earlier levels that are more appropriately examined in terms of source analysis.²⁴

2 Samuel 5–8

The first complete section on the rule of David runs from 2 Samuel 5–8. This, admittedly, is not a division of the text that is often employed, especially because of the discussions that invariably occur about exactly when we reach the end point of the History of David's Rise (HDR).²⁵ Typically, 2 Samuel 5 is reckoned to be the end of the HDR, whilst chapter 6 is assigned to the ark narrative. The so-called Succession Narrative (SN) is most commonly thought to start at 2 Samuel 9, so that 2 Samuel 7–8 stand rather apart from the main group of sources available to the historian. However, exact agreement on these various boundaries has been difficult to reach, and it is arguable that one of the principal reasons for this is that the final compiler has not left any of the sources in a complete form, weaving them instead into a new literary product with its own integrity, one that is not dependent upon the meaning of the various sources. Rather than being an amalgam of sources, 2 Samuel 5–8 shows clear evidence of being a carefully written whole.

Before turning to consider the specifically literary features of this unit, we should note that one of its consistent features is that it represents a dischronologised narrative. Each of the narrative units within it has its own internally consistent chronology, but the sequence of narratives themselves is drawn from the whole period of David's reign, so that no obvious chronology is to be recognised within this unit overall. The importance of this is that these chapters aim to provide a theological reflection on the whole of David's reign, a reflection that is essentially positive. The importance of this strategy can be recognised from the two narratives with which the account of David's reign begins. In 2 Samuel 5:1–5 we have the account of the gathering of the leaders of Israel to appoint David as king, an event

²⁴ The comment by S. Nikaido, 'Hagar and Ishmael as Literary Figures: An Inter-Textual Study', *VT* 51 (2001) 221 (although offered in a different context) is appropriate, 'I do not mean that the historical question should not be asked, but simply that it should not be asked *too soon*' (Emphasis original).

²⁵ Cf. A.A. Anderson, *2 Samuel* (Dallas: Word, 1989), xxiiiiff. A more interesting reading is offered by Murray, *Divine Prerogative*, but he only proceeds as far as 2 Sa. 7:29, an approach that seems to leave ch. 8 as something of a literary orphan.

that takes place some seven and a half years after his accession to the throne of Judah. The chronology of the early period of David's reign is notoriously difficult to reconstruct with any confidence, but the fact that the narrator here makes a specific point of emphasising the timing is important. It is not just the necessity of David being crowned at the start of his reign that is important—it is also that he becomes king over Israel as well as Judah at a relatively early stage in his career, and it is this that is highlighted by the narrator's reference to the period of his reign. Conversely, at least some of the details of the second unit within this section, the capture of Jerusalem and David's subsequent development of it (5:6–16), must come from the very end of David's reign. This is apparent from the mention of Hiram, and the fact that on Bright's chronology, David reigned ca. 1000–961 BC, whilst Hiram reigned ca. 969–936 BC.²⁶ The events that are described in these opening narratives of David's reign thus span virtually the whole period of his reign, a feature that is continued in the balance of this section.

The two opening sections not only provide us with a selection of events from across David's reign, they also provide the narrator with the opportunity to shape our reading of David as king. Both of these opening passages are conspicuous for the positive way in which David is portrayed, and specifically in regard to the authority of Yahweh. David's greatness comes out of his submission to Yahweh. In the account of David's accession to the throne the narrator is able to make this point indirectly, through the voice of the leaders of the nation who come to anoint David, and in their confession that Yahweh had said to David, 'You shall shepherd my people Israel and shall be a נָגִיד over Israel.'²⁷ The elders' confession is vital for the presentation of David as the one who is moving to the throne that Yahweh has established for him. In 5:6–16 there is no access to speech from others, and we

²⁶ J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (3rd edn; London: SCM, 1980), 204. Bright also speculates on a possible treaty with Hiram's father, Abibaal. The dates are far from sure, but the continuing involvement of Hiram with Solomon would certainly suggest that he was more a contemporary of Solomon than David.

²⁷ Against E. Lipinski, 'NAGID, der Kronprinz', *VT* 24 (1974) 497–99, נָגִיד cannot mean 'crown prince' since David has been given this role by Yahweh while Saul is still king. Further, we cannot defend the meaning 'crown prince' on the assumption that the description of Solomon in 1 Ki. 1:35 is the first use of the term. The narrator clearly expects it to be understandable of David at this point. I take נָגִיד to be a term that describes someone with the authority of a king within a local group, but for whom the formal office is not developed. Some analogy with 'Mambo' in Shona or 'Nkosi' in Ndebele and Zulu might be appropriate, because of the flexibility with which these terms can be used.

have an important point of direct intrusion into the narrative by the narrator in 5:12, where we are told that as a result of the capture of Jerusalem and the positive actions of Hiram that ‘David knew that Yahweh had established him as מֶלֶךְ over Israel.’ There is thus no need to develop a contrast between David as נָגִיד and David as מֶלֶךְ. David is both, and in both the narrator highlights information so that we are assured that David has achieved his position because of Yahweh’s presence with him. Moreover, in his move to the throne David had not sought to grasp power, a fact that was also implicitly recognised by the elders. In addition, in 5:12 the narrator makes clear that David acknowledges that his authority is derivative of that of Yahweh. The opening narratives within this section thus serve a crucial purpose in not only introducing David’s reign, but of defining it as a whole, from beginning to end, as one that is established by Yahweh’s authority.

The balance of this section, 5:17–8:14, then confirms the emphasis of this opening portion. This section can be seen to be structured as a chiasm, centred on David’s submission to Yahweh. A slightly different chiasm to the one proposed here has been suggested by Flanagan,²⁸ with the inclusion of 5:13–16 and 8:15–18, so that the list of David’s sons in 5:13–16 balances the list of David’s officials in 8:15–18. Although this is plausible, the link between a family list and a list of officials, even one that ends with a perplexing reference to David’s sons as priests, is not all that clear. Moreover, a more exact link can be found with 2 Samuel 3:2–5, which lists at least some of David’s sons born in Hebron. The distribution of these lists of sons and officials at significant turning points in the narrative would suggest that they are used as Janus links, both closing off what has preceded and opening the way for a new development in the presentation of David’s reign.²⁹ Aside from this point, Flanagan’s proposal is highly persuasive, offering the following structure:

²⁸ J.W. Flanagan, ‘Social Transformation and Ritual in 2 Samuel 6’, in C.L. Meyers and M. O’Connor, eds., *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Festschrift for D.N. Freedman* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 361–72.

²⁹ The fact that this strategy is adopted across the traditional divisions of the History of David’s Rise and the Succession Narrative is indicative of the fact that these sources, to whatever extent they have been preserved, have been incorporated into a new and completed narrative structure. On the difficulties in isolating these elements, cf. the proposals of A.F. Campbell, *Of Prophets and Kings: A Late Ninth Century Document (1 Samuel 1–2 Kings 10)* (Washington DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 1986), 125–38.

- A Military Victories with Yahweh's Help, 5:17–25
 B Worship of Yahweh: The Bringing of the Ark, 6:1–23
 B¹ Worship of Yahweh: Nathan's Oracle, 7:1–29
 A¹ Military Victories with Yahweh's Help, 8:1–14

Of the two possible chiasmic structures suggested by Benusan,³⁰ this is representative of the crossover type.³¹ One should be careful of making too much of a given chiasm, and one should certainly appreciate that chiasm, like beauty, is frequently in the eyes of the beholder.³² Further, chiasm can have a number of different rhetorical purposes, and the idea that the centre is necessarily the point of focus is not an idea that always holds up to careful scrutiny.³³ This particular chiasm may have been formed more for mnemonic purposes than persuasive ones, but it is still striking that worship, and in particular the movement of the ark towards a settled location dominates this section of the text. This observation becomes even more important when we recognise that the chiasm in 2 Samuel 21–24 is also centred on worship, albeit private worship rather than the more public forms envisaged here. We can also note that these chapters bring together materials from disparate periods in David's life without any chronological structure, in order to emphasise his submission to the ways of Yahweh throughout his reign.

Both of the chapters in the centre of the present section on worship focus on the ark. Further, in both cases we have David attempting to establish the terms for the location of the ark and needing to submit himself once again to Yahweh. In the case of the removal of the ark to Jerusalem, there is an implied criticism of David because of his failure to adhere to proper Levitical procedure in the moving of the ark. Further, his own desire for power, as reflected in the question 'How can I bring the ark to me?', certainly raises questions about David's motivation.³⁴ Likewise, the seemingly callous way in which he speaks to Michal in the closing verses come across as harsh and

³⁰ Cited by C.R. Dickson and P.J. Botha, 'The Role and Portrayal of the King in Esther', *Old Testament Essays* 13/2 (2000) 157.

³¹ The other being the concealment type, which usually involves a reversal of events, such as we find in Esther or Ruth.

³² Note the amusing example offered by M. Butterworth, *Structure and the Book of Zechariah* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 53ff., in which he randomly drew together verses from the book of Isaiah to form 'Isaiah 67', from which he then proceeded to demonstrate a quite convincing chiasm.

³³ Cf. the criticism of much rhetorical criticism in M.J. Boda, 'Chiasmus in Ubiquity: Symmetrical Mirages in Nehemiah 9', *JSOT* 71 (1996) 55–70.

³⁴ Cf. Murray, *Divine Prerogative*, 128–29.

jarring.³⁵ Nevertheless, these criticisms are not developed, though their continued presence should caution against any reading of these chapters as presenting an idealised David. In the end, however, the chapter is presented as a positive portrayal of David, with the movement of the ark represented as a part of the process of centralisation of government and worship in Jerusalem.

This provides a natural lead into 2 Samuel 7, though the rather vague chronological note in verse 1 might suggest the passing of a considerable period of time. The literature on this chapter is vast, but our concern here is simply to note that it functions in parallel with chapter 6. There are, once again, implied criticisms of David within the chapter, and certainly Yahweh's directive to Nathan after his initially rather toadying response to David's suggestion might be taken to indicate a degree of impatience on his part with the idea of a settled abode, especially if the resident monarch saw this as a means of controlling the deity. However, Yahweh's basically positive disposition towards David is established by the dynastic promise, whilst his prayer in which he accepts the terms established by Yahweh indicates David's submission to Yahweh.³⁶ Once again, David is not presented as a perfect king, but he is one who is prepared to submit himself to Yahweh.

Such a presentation of David is further established by the battle accounts that surround the worship narratives, since the emphasis of both 5:17–25 and 8:1–14 is that David won his battles by means of his submission to Yahweh. It is not that David is a great general. Rather, it is by the presence of Yahweh that David wins his battles. In 5:17–25 we have the record of two separate battles against the Philistines. In both cases we are presented with a record of discussions between David and Yahweh after David has inquired of him, and in both cases it is asserted that Yahweh had acted in the provision of victory. In the first of the battle accounts this is emphasised by means of direct speech attributed to David, whilst in the second we have another example of narrative intrusion by the narrator to establish the point. 2 Samuel 8:1–14 also describes a series of battles. This chapter is more annalistic in its presentation, but it is striking that in the heart of

³⁵ Cf. R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 124–25, and R.F. Youngblood, '1 & 2 Samuel', in F.E. Gaebelin, ed., *The New Expositor's Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 878.

³⁶ Eslinger, *House of God*, offers a far more critical reading of David in this chapter. However, it seems to ignore the importance of the wider structure of the finished text, a structure that emphasises Yahweh's presence with David.

the chapter we once again encounter a direct narrative intrusion by the narrator in 8:7 and 8:14. The presence of these direct expressions of narrative voice at the mid-point and end of the section point to the fact that the narrator particularly wished to emphasise the presence of Yahweh with David. As with the earlier battle accounts, we are assured that David does not win because of his skill as a general. What matters is the presence of Yahweh. And David's reign mirrors this presence of Yahweh, because we are told that he 'administered justice and equity for all his people', a telling statement at the end of a section that has recorded the integration of two formerly separate groups.

As we examine the whole of 2 Samuel 5–8, therefore, we can observe that these chapters have wanted to emphasise certain key themes, and that the narrator has either structured the material or intruded directly to emphasise them. These themes revolve around the fact that, for the whole period of his reign, David is to be viewed in a positive light because of the fact that the presence of Yahweh with him can be demonstrated in the recognition of the elders of Israel and capture of Jerusalem, along with David's submission to Yahweh in worship and in battle. These chapters thus seek to persuade us to view the whole of David's reign in a positive light, though not one that is uncritical. Nevertheless, David is to be regarded as a good king because of his submission to Yahweh, submission that is demonstrated by dependence upon him in worship and in battle. In this way, he is able to provide the ideal for kingship in Samuel and Kings.

2 Samuel 21–24

Before turning to consider 2 Samuel 9–20, in which there is undoubted criticism of David and his abuse of power, we need to consider 2 Samuel 21–24. The reason for considering the material in this order is that it gives us the opportunity to observe the repetition of the pattern that we observed in 2 Samuel 5–8, a chiasmic structure that offers a positive theological assessment of David that is centred on worship.³⁷ Moreover, due to the fact that it also offers a dischronologised structure, it is apparent that it also seeks to provide a theological reflection on the whole of David's reign. The repetition of

³⁷ Cf. B.S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979), 273ff.

this structure points to the deliberate patterning of 2 Samuel 5–24, so that the ‘purposeful symmetry’ of which Gordon speaks³⁸ might apply not only to the Samuel appendix, but also to the whole of this stretch of text. Further, this would argue against McCarter’s view that this block of text is ‘not related to the earlier literature it embraced’.³⁹ The balancing of related chiasmic structures either side of chapters 9–20 suggests something much more intentional. The probability of a chiasm for this section of text is well known, but it is worth noting the actual structure:

A	Famine, 21:1–14
B	Warrior Stories, 21:15–22
C	Psalm, 22:1–51
C ¹	Psalm, 23:1–7
B ¹	Warrior Stories, 23:8–39
A ¹	Plague, 24:1–25

The structure, though slightly more developed than that of 2 Samuel 5–8, shows a remarkable level of similarity. The two psalms at the centre are expressions of worship on David’s part, whilst the warrior stories also point to victories won with Yahweh’s help, though in this case they are not victories actually won by David. The decisively different element in the process is the outermost pair of stories, which are designed to demonstrate David’s innocence before Yahweh in terms of the famine and the plague that afflicted the nation. Once again, the narrator has sought to present a favourable impression of David, even if it still retains certain elements of criticism. As with 2 Samuel 5–8, we also encounter the narrator’s voice in the foreground of the narratives, ensuring that they are read in a way that points to the desired positive appraisal of David. This is further affirmed in the fact that David is called the lamp of Israel (21:17), though in fact David refers to Yahweh as his lamp (22:29).⁴⁰ This reference to David, however, initiates a pattern of similar references that look back to David in the book of Kings,⁴¹ where the lamp reference consistently points to the fact that the durability of the

³⁸ Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 45.

³⁹ P.K. McCarter, *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 16; Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 247f.

⁴⁰ There is a spelling difference between the two passages—in 21:17 it is *נֵר*, whereas in 22:29 we have *נֵיר*, though the pronunciation would probably have been virtually identical.

⁴¹ 1 Ki. 11:36, 15:4, 2 Ki. 8:19. Cf. 2 Ch. 21:7. Note that the word is spelled *נֵיר*, with different pointing from 2 Sa. 22:29. The reference in 2 Sa. 21:17 represents the normal spelling of ‘lamp’. Given the diversity of spellings offered within the Hebrew Bible, attempts to suggest that there is something significant in these variants are based upon the slenderest of evidence.

ruling house in Judah is tied specifically to the conduct of David and the promises made to him by Yahweh.

When we examine the outermost stories in this section, we are immediately struck by the ways in which the narrator has sought to declare David to be innocent of charges that might be made against him. David's submission to Yahweh is something that the narrator highlights in both the plague and the famine account through direct comment. In the case of the famine, David is to be declared innocent of a premeditated attack on the remaining descendants of Saul, a fact that the narrator highlights by noting that David 'sought the face of Yahweh' (21:1). It is Yahweh who reveals to David that the famine is traceable to Saul's actions against the Gibeonites, and it is on this basis that David approached the Gibeonites to determine a suitable means of penalising the house of Saul. Even within this context, we are reminded of David's faithfulness to his oath to Mephibosheth (21:7),⁴² whilst the story concludes by observing that after this, and the proper burial of Saul and Jonathan, God once again answered prayer on behalf of the nation. Such direct comment by the narrator makes the suggestion that the story is told so that we do not know whether these events are an expression of a primitive expiation of guilt or mere political opportunism,⁴³ almost incomprehensible. The story may well have been told at one stage in a way that left the final interpretation open, but the final form of the story does not.

The interpretation of the plague narrative in 2 Samuel 24 is much more complex, as it highlights both David's willingness to seek power for himself and his vulnerability before Yahweh. David does not emerge from this story unscathed, but his innocence is also declared.⁴⁴ Moreover, David is consistently shown to be one who submits to the reign of Yahweh. Curiously enough, this factor emerges in the opening lines of the chapter, where we are told that David initiated his census due to the incitement (וַיִּסֹּף) of Yahweh. That is to say, David

⁴² Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 248, suggests that v. 7 may be a later addition to the story. While he may be correct at the level of source criticism, viewed from the perspective of the final narrator the inclusion is important.

⁴³ Birch, '1 & 2 Samuel', 1359. A similar reading is offered by Brueggeman, *Power, Providence, Personality*, 108.

⁴⁴ J.W. Wright, 'The Innocence of David in 1 Chronicles 21', *JSOT* 60 (1993) 87–105 has argued that when 1 Ch. 21 is read apart from the perspective established by 2 Sa. 24, the plague can be seen to have been brought on by Joab's failure to complete the census rather than any sin on David's part. Such a reading is not altogether persuasive, but it does shine some light back onto 2 Sa. 24. David's innocence is an issue not only in 1 Ch. 21, but also in 2 Sa. 24.

is not presented as one who initiates this action himself, even though he will subsequently take responsibility for it. Further, Yahweh's anger is not directed against David, but against Israel as a nation, suggesting that the 'and again' with which the chapter commences is a deliberate reference back to 2 Samuel 21:1–14. At the same time, through the process of the dialogue with Joab, the narrator demonstrates at least some culpability on David's part, perhaps because of the responsibility of the king for the people. But the main thrust of the chapter is still to suggest that David is not the one finally responsible for the plague, even if he accepts that he has played a part in it. The narrator highlights this by pointing to the fact that David is conscience-stricken even before Gad announces the decision of Yahweh, and indeed it is David who initiates the dialogue with Yahweh (24:10–11). David is finally presented as a king who is prepared to submit himself to the greater reign of Yahweh. If he was not quite the 'self-serving bureaucratic monarch' that Brueggemann suggests, he does at least end the story as one 'who relies on and receives the mercy of Yahweh'.⁴⁵

The two warrior accounts seek to demonstrate once again that David's successes in battle are successes that have been won for him by Yahweh, albeit through his warriors. The feature of dischronologisation is again apparent here. On the one hand, the warrior account in 21:15–21 would appear to come from later in David's reign because of the apparent weakness of the king,⁴⁶ though 2 Samuel 5:17ff. might be taken to suggest that David had overcome the Philistines relatively early in his reign. However, the various warrior accounts in 23:8–39 would appear to have been drawn from a range of periods in David's life, as can be seen from the fact that Benaiah (23:20ff.) is represented as being an active soldier in 1 Kings 2, whereas the sons of Zeruah were broadly contemporaries of David. Taken as a whole, this would suggest that these warrior accounts have been drawn from across the whole of David's reign as a part of the process of providing a 'final word' on the whole of it.

In spite of these features, none of these warrior accounts is presented in a well-developed narrative form. Rather, there is something almost annalistic in the way in which they are presented,

⁴⁵ Brueggemann, *Power, Providence, Personality*, 108.

⁴⁶ A.H. van Zyl, et al., *Israel and Her Neighbours* (Durban: Butterworths, 1979), 122.

with each vignette passing with a minimum of comment.⁴⁷ Yet, in spite of this, a strong and overt theological dimension emerges in both. Strikingly, 2 Samuel 21:15–21 achieves this by not making any direct theological comment, something that is unique in these chapters. However, the reference to David as ‘the lamp of Israel’ would resonate with those traditions that saw in this terminology a hope for the nation because of the promises of Yahweh. Moreover, even though David is presented as one who is unable to overcome the Philistine giants himself, yet it is still within his reign that the victory is achieved. David’s weakness meant that he needed to depend more on his assistants and warriors, but that in no way diminished his importance.

The series of brief narratives leading up to the listing of the thirty warriors who formed David’s bodyguard in 23:8–39 are similarly undeveloped. They share, however, a common theme with 21:15–21 in their emphasis upon David’s dependence upon others. He may well have been a warrior king, but he was not one who achieved victory in his own strength. The victories achieved through two of ‘the three’ are also attributed to the power of Yahweh (23:10, 12), whilst in the midst of these accounts the story of David’s refusal to drink the water that was brought from Jerusalem is also used to point to his own submission to Yahweh. Moreover, David thus demonstrated that he would not pull rank—the lives of his men were of equal importance to his own.⁴⁸ That is not to suggest that David comes out of this section without criticism—the fact that Uriah the Hittite was the last one of the thirty to be listed gives his name a degree of prominence, and becomes a perpetual reminder of the fact that David could indeed be a craven, power-grasping despot. But though the criticism is present, it is muted, and David is portrayed as a king who is a comrade, not one who seeks to dominate.⁴⁹

At the heart of this section of 2 Samuel are the two psalms, both of which are placed into a specific situation in David’s life, though the exact point of reference in 2 Samuel 22:1 is not clear. In light of what we have suggested so far, however, it seems likely that the intention is that we are to understand 2 Samuel 22 as coming from early in

⁴⁷ H.W. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel* (London: SCM, 1964), 386, makes a tentative link to the ‘Book of the Wars of Yahweh’. Since the references to the book are in poetry, and not the prose we have here, this seems unlikely. More likely, the narrator is drawing on an annal, some form of court record.

⁴⁸ Youngblood, ‘1 & 2 Samuel’, 1089–90.

⁴⁹ Brueggemann, *Power, Providence, Personality*, 99ff.

David's reign, whilst 23:1–7 is clearly from the end. The two poems are thus presented as the bookends of David's reign. In this way, they provide David's own summary on the whole of his reign, and the emphasis is once again on the role that Yahweh has played. The theme of both poems is thus that whatever David has achieved as king, he has achieved it because of Yahweh's presence with him.

That 2 Samuel 22 is meant to reflect on the earlier period of David's reign is indicated by the specific reference to Saul in verse 1. The rest of the enemies to which the passage refers are undefined, but we are probably to think of the Philistines. Nevertheless, the narrator is content to leave that element undeveloped. But what this psalm does emphasise is the way in which Yahweh has been with David, something that is achieved through a range of metaphors that draw on images of military protection (22:2–4) and theophany (22:5–16),⁵⁰ metaphors that are applied to David's experience of deliverance (22:17–20). David is also able to claim to have been rewarded by Yahweh for his commitment to him, a commitment that is expressed in the acknowledgement of the fact that it is Yahweh who is David's lamp. Although verses 31–34 then seek to demonstrate that David's discovery is applicable to others, the balance of the psalm seeks to continue to reflect on the ways in which Yahweh has given David victory. In this way, it becomes apparent that no direct comment was required by the narrator in the preceding section because the psalm itself would make the point on its own without intrusion. Victory comes because of the provision of Yahweh, and not because of David's own strength and military prowess. And as the closing verse of the psalm makes clear, this is not finally limited to David alone, but continues to have relevance for his descendants.

The brief psalm in 23:1–7 is clearly meant to be understood as coming from the end of the reign of David since we are told that it is a record of his last words.⁵¹ What is emphasised is that the success of David's reign is to be attributed to God, because of the fact that David's own house is right with God. Although we have read of acts on David's part that hardly seem consistent with this declaration, this simply indicates that David did not measure up absolutely. But the emphasis of this psalm, especially when read in light of the preceding

⁵⁰ On the elements of theophany and possible Ugaritic background, cf. J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai: Covenant and Theophany in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 302ff.

⁵¹ In all probability, we are to understand this as his final public utterance, not the last words he ever spoke.

one is that David has, in general at least, ruled according to Yahweh's standard of justice. Great claims are made by David and for David in both of these psalms, but both also assert that David could only have reigned successfully if he had indeed submitted his own reign to that of Yahweh. Taken together, these two psalms thus seek to demonstrate, in the act of worship, that David as king is one who is submitted to Yahweh, and that, although we have encountered him at various times seeking to grasp power for himself, his greatness finally lay in recognising the limits of royal power. Furthermore, these two psalms also suggest that we are to read this as the dominant paradigm for David's reign.

Chapters 21–24 are thus a sophisticated reflection on the whole of David's reign, a reflection that wants to assert that the whole of David's reign is to be assessed positively. There are two direct allusions back to the events of 2 Samuel 9–20, the story that is directly critical of David, and the presence of these two allusions would suggest that the final narrator was determined to indicate that the positive assessment of David's reign that is presented here is not one that is achieved by ignoring 2 Samuel 9–20. Rather, one can affirm the generally positive nature of David's reign in full awareness of all that had taken place.

2 Samuel 9–20

When we come to these chapters, we enter one of the most commented on portions of the Old Testament, and there is no need to repeat the main lines of research at length. However, what does need to be made clear is the fact that whereas the sections of text either side of it aim to present David in a fundamentally positive light, albeit with an awareness of certain criticisms, these chapters seek to portray David in a negative light, but not so negative that the continued effect of Yahweh's presence with David cannot be seen. David is critiqued, but the narrator has sought to limit the critique by means of direct narrative comment. Further, whereas both 2 Samuel 5–8 and 20–24 represent dischronologous narrative sequences, both of which aim to present a reflection on the whole of David's reign, 2 Samuel 9–20 represents a continuous narrative, one that is chronologically sequenced.⁵² Within the narrative structure of 2 Samuel 5–24 this is

⁵² It is frequently suggested that certain parts of this narrative unit are secondary, most notably the Ammonite war material. If this is the case, then it is a judgment that is offered relative to source materials, and not the narrative as it currently stands. The narrative that we now have does offer one continuous story, with

remarkable in itself, and especially when we recognise the length of this single narrative sequence. However, we should also note that this difference may also relate to the rhetorical purpose of the narrator in that both David's sin and its consequences are seen to be resolved within the confines of one story, and this one story is not to be understood as overcoming the assessment of the whole of David's reign that is offered by the units that surround it. David's sin and its consequences are seen to be limited to one story (albeit, one that takes some time to work itself out), and that one story, however significant, does not finally alter the way in which David's reign is to be assessed.

The main technique employed by the narrator in these chapters is simply the telling of the story so that we see the point.⁵³ For the most part, the narrative voice is less obtrusive than in the other sections. However, there are several points at which we do find direct comment by the narrator, and, with one exception, the function of these comments is to ameliorate the negative elements in the portrayal of David, and this is done from the perspective of Yahweh still being committed to David in spite of his sin. We need, therefore, to briefly examine each of these points of narrative intrusion. In addition, dialogue is also employed to point to Yahweh's presence with David, essentially providing a test for his presence.

The first narrative intrusion is the observation at 2 Samuel 11:27b that 'The thing that David had done was evil (וַיַּרְע) in the eyes of Yahweh.' In a very real sense, no such comment was necessary, and it goes against the common pattern of narrators not commenting directly upon the actions of the characters in Hebrew narrative.⁵⁴ However, it drives home the point that when David seeks to act with the sort of power that an oriental despot might normally expect, then he is no longer a king who is ruling according to the model that is expected. Grasping for power is never acceptable in Joshua–Kings. The preferred model is always to accept the greater reign of Yahweh.

David's sin and its consequences being described, the pivot being Nathan's announcement of David's punishment.

⁵³ Youngblood, '1 & 2 Samuel', 915, points out that there is no convincing overall literary structure for these chapters. However, he does point to smaller chiasms at 9:1–13, 11:1–12:31, 13:1–22, 14:1–20, 14:21–33, and 15:1–20:22. He also points to a double chiasm at 13:23–39. Even if not all of these can be sustained, it does suggest that a high degree of literary intentionality is present.

⁵⁴ Cf. T. Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Leicester: Apollos, 1987), 89.

Therefore, the presence of this direct aside is, at one level, redundant though at another level it is a powerful means of making clear that David could not act in this way. At the same time, this aside provides an introduction to the parable offered by Nathan that leads to David effectively convicting himself—a strategy that will not work anywhere near as well when Job tries it by means of the wise woman from Tekoa (2 Samuel 14)! The narrative aside, however, stands in stark contrast to David's response to the punishment announced by Nathan. This is an act of simple acceptance of the justice of the punishment with the words 'I have sinned against Yahweh'. David will, of course, seek to have the child born of his union with Bathsheba live, but with the death of the child it becomes clearer again that he has accepted the punishment.

The other point of direct comment by the narrator is at 2 Samuel 17:14, where we are told that Yahweh 'commanded' to defeat the good advice of Ahithopel with the advice of Hushai. This comes, of course, after another direct narrative comment at 16:23 where it was pointed out that Ahithopel's advice was considered to be as good as obtaining an oracle from God. This aside, of course, makes the reader expect that Ahithopel's advice will be followed, but in fact it is the advice of Hushai that triumphs. On the face of it, this is entirely surprising, not only because of Ahithopel's reputation, but also because Hushai's advice contains more in the way of bluster than anything else. So this time it is essential that readers are aware of the fact that Yahweh is indeed working for David, notwithstanding the appalling nature of his crimes.

Apart from these direct asides, the narrator also employs dialogue to affirm the presence of Yahweh with David, even if David himself does not necessarily know it. This issue is raised decisively in 2 Samuel 15:24–30, where the question of Yahweh's presence is generated in two ways. First, when Abiathar and Zadok reach David with the ark, he sends them back to Jerusalem, assuring them that if he has 'found favour with Yahweh, he will bring me back' (2 Samuel 15:25). Shortly after, when he hears that Ahithopel has gone over to Absalom, David prays 'O Yahweh, make the counsel of Ahithopel foolishness' (2 Samuel 15:31).⁵⁵ At the beginning of his movement away from Jerusalem, David's speech raises the question of the presence of Yahweh. Moreover, it also points to David as one who

⁵⁵ Once again, the possibility that v. 31 (cf. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 202) is a later addition does not change the fact that from the point of view of the finished text this prayer fulfils a vital function.

accepts the authority of Yahweh, so that once again David will not grasp for power. The right to install and remove kings is something that belongs to Yahweh alone, and these crucial speech units make it clear that this is the approach that David is taking. And when David is therefore returned to the throne of all Israel, it is understood that although he has employed a range of methods that were available to him, he is finally being returned to office because Yahweh is with him. David may well have failed because he sought to grasp for power, but a penitent David who recognises that power finally belongs to Yahweh can indeed be restored to his throne.

In this way, the narrator has made clear that David's punishment has been completed, and that even through the punishment, Yahweh continued to be with him. David's sin is in no way denied, but his failure is not the last word.

Conclusion—Rhetoric and Spirituality

We have spoken so far of the work of the narrator, and of the ways in which the story has been shaped to present a positive view of the whole of the reign of David. There remains, however, the need to consider the reasons for this rhetoric, and I would want to suggest that one of the key reasons for it is to address a profound issue of spirituality in the exile. David as the lamp for Israel was not something that was seen as being true only for the tenth century—it was of profound importance for the sixth century.⁵⁶

The profound sense of loss generated by the exile is probably best appropriated by means of imagination rather than the more normal spadework of the historian. The exile was seemingly the loss of land, temple and king, along with those more personal elements that would have affected Israelites in the exile. It was thus a time that generated a crisis of faith, a crisis that would have struggled to appreciate how it was that Yahweh was continuing to work among his people. But by presenting David in the way that he does, the narrator seeks to offer a word of hope amidst the hopelessness, an assurance that the promises of Yahweh were still valid.⁵⁷ The rhetoric that has been offered about

⁵⁶ That David is an exemplar of spirituality is a point that is well established in the study of the Psalms—cf. G. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico: Scholars, 1985), 297ff. and J.L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 87ff.

⁵⁷ Cf. R.W. Klein, *Israel in Exile: A Theological Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 29ff.

David is not presented simply to explain why it was that Solomon was able to succeed him. It was offered to point back to Yahweh as the one who was with David, and to reassure the people that the promises made to David, especially those in 2 Samuel 7, continued to be valid. Admittedly, it was necessary to explain how it was that the nation had come to be in exile, but this is related to the fact that exile was not to be the end. Hence, those in the exile needed to be given hope, and this hope was found in the promises of Yahweh to David. By demonstrating that the whole of David's reign is to be regarded as positive, and that the events of 2 Samuel 9–20 constitute only one, admittedly rather long, story as opposed to a cluster of stories that show David in a more positive light, the initial hearers and readers of the final text were assured that David had not abrogated those promises by his actions. Indeed, David had paid in full for his crimes, and Yahweh had continued to be with him. Thus, the author is able to point back to the consistency of Yahweh through David, whilst David's story becomes a paradigm for the nation as a whole as they are assured that acceptance of the reign of Yahweh, and not grasping for power themselves, will see their current suffering come to an end. Moreover, because the promise to David was still valid, then the people could still look forward to restoration.

The spirituality that this offers is thus one that is profoundly aware of the sense of loss and purposelessness that went with the experience of exile, and it is this sense that the narrative confronts. It does not deny the reality of this experience, but it wants to offer hope as an alternative, hope that looks back to David to point to what Yahweh will do. Thus, the nation might also discover that failure is not final, and that there remains the hope of restoration. However much the subsequent sins of the nation had damaged their relationship with Yahweh, the basic promises from the time of David were still valid because David is finally to be judged as faithful to Yahweh. In this way, David as the lamp of Israel, who found his own light in Yahweh, continued to shine for the exilic community and thus could the narrator offer a word of hope and consolation.