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THE HISTORIAN'S HEROINES: EXAMINING THE CHARACTERIZATION OF FEMALE ROLE MODELS IN THE EARLY ISRAELITE MONARCHY

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Biblical narratives are often read with an androcentric lens, resulting in the marginalization of women's stories. Female figures appear frequently throughout the text, and their stories can function as exemplars of leadership if the reader is able to bring these women-stories to the forefront. This article examines the characterization of Hannah, Abigail, Bathsheba, and Rizpah in the books of Samuel and Kings—essential figures for the trajectory of the monarchy towards God's purposes. These women of ancient, patriarchal Israel were not powerless and subservient as they are often made out to be but had the power to alter the course of history through their speech and actions. Through the study of biblical narrative and characterization, this paper seeks to contribute towards developing a composite picture of women in leadership that is not confined to conventional roles and titles, but one that reflects the mutuality of the *Imago Dei*: men and women together, reflecting the image of God to the world.

I. INTRODUCTION

"The bows of the mighty are fallen, but the feeble bind on strength."
1 Samuel 2:4.¹

The Deuteronomistic Historian's (hereafter the historian)² view of God's story is a story of the Great Reversal. The mighty are humbled, and the feeble are girded up with

1. All Scripture is henceforth quoted in ESV unless otherwise stated.

2. I have chosen here to use Martin Noth's designation of the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings as a single literary work. Noth proposes a single author, the Deuteronomist (or historian) for the work, although to-date, the identity of the historian still remains debated by scholars. See Martin Noth and Department of Biblical Studies University of Sheffield, *The Deuteronomistic History*

strength. Bible narratives are most often read with an androcentric lens—the male characters are the heroes, while the female characters are often read as static or flat characters, mere functions of the plot, if they are even noticed at all. Female characters appear frequently in Samuel and Kings, and the historian does not necessarily portray them as weak or bland. However, today's readers, conditioned to read female characters as “the weaker sex,” marginalize these women in the text. This perceived inferiority is certainly not the historian's view of many of the female characters of Samuel and Kings. Carol Meyers argues that “although women are far less visible than men in the androcentric Hebrew Bible, they are not presented as inferior.”³

In this paper, I argue that the women are essential to the historian, particularly in the transitory periods of the monarchy. They are important for the movement of the narrative towards the theological program of the historian: themes of covenantal faithfulness and righteous rule are at the forefront of the historian's theological concerns for the monarchy.⁴ The earthly king is not meant to stand in competition with God's sovereign rule but rather, to embody it.⁵ Thus, the success of the king is measured not by the amassing of power and the extension of influence, but by obedience to God's covenant (Deut. 17:14-20). The historian does not whitewash the nobility⁶ and very often, the noblemen do not act in ways befitting of their God-given office. While we are accustomed to expecting the intervention of the prophetic office in such cases, it is not uncommon for the historian to introduce a female character to realign the narrative to its proper course.

Although many women appear within the books of Samuel and Kings, this paper limits its scope to examining the characterizations of Hannah, Abigail, Bathsheba and Rizpah as positive role models; for the historian, they are heroines.⁷ Through their words (or silence) and actions, they: become foils to errant male leadership; prefigure the prophetic office (or even become prophets themselves) in calling leadership to account and reminding them of who they are supposed to be; and shift the narrative toward the historian's theological program.

II. HANNAH: THE SILENT SUFFERER

Hannah is a key figure in the pre-Davidic period, during the uneasy transition between the period of the Judges and the birth of the monarchy. A careful reading of the Hannah narrative reveals the indispensability of her contribution towards the genesis of

(Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), and Brian Neil Peterson, *The Authors of the Deuteronomistic History: Locating a Tradition in Ancient Israel* (Augsburg, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).

3. Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 203.

4. Bruce C. Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 255.

5. Although it is the people who demand for a king, God points out to Samuel that it is his divine kingship that has been rejected (1 Sam. 8:7). Saul is appointed by God himself (10:1), but it is clear that Saul does not have sovereignty independent from God. Despite Saul's military successes, his disobedience ultimately leads to God's rejection of Saul as king.

6. In contrast to Chronicles, which omits accounts such as that of David and Bathsheba.

7. Certainly not all the women in the D-history are considered role models or heroines, but it is not the scope of this paper to examine the women who are depicted in negative light, such as Michal, Maacah, Athaliah, and Jezebel.

the kingmaker and ultimately, the monarchy. Bronner states, “Hannah’s story was, of course, intended to be viewed in the framework of the book of Samuel, as background for the miraculous birth and life of a great Israelite leader. Yet her powerful determination to overcome adversity places her at the forefront of the compelling narrative.”⁸

Divine Agency and Human

Divine agency is an important underlying theme for the historian, and it is always set in tension with human initiative. Brueggemann points out that “divine agency and human agency are almost always imagined in these narratives as being inextricably but ambiguously bound together in such a way that neither is autonomous or effective in and of itself.”⁹ Although the monarchy is seemingly brought about as a result of the people asking for a king so they could be like the surrounding nations, the historian sees that God is committed to both the inception and the continuation of the monarchy, with the king being the representative of God’s kingship on earth. God invests His power (anointing/Spirit) and His promises (covenant) in the office of the monarch to see it succeed. As bookends to the books of Samuel, Hannah and David’s songs (and their stories) reveal that God works through the reversal of fortunes, humbling the lofty and elevating the weak.¹⁰ It is often those who are excluded or overlooked but whose hearts are oriented in the right direction, that is, towards God, that act in the right ways.¹¹

If, as Alexander proposes, the books of Genesis to Kings were meant to be read as a “unified narrative”¹² in which exists a recurring theme of “God’s intervention in overcoming the barrenness of the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel,”¹³ then we could consider Hannah the last in the line of Old Testament matriarchs. In her childlessness, she identifies with the barren matriarchs before her. Cook describes the barren mother type:

The biblical type of the barren mother involves a childless woman who bears a son through divine intervention, then takes steps to ensure her son’s success. Often the sons in question serve a special function as leaders of the people in times of crisis or transition (e.g. Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samuel). The Deity acts

8. Leila Leah Bronner, *Stories of Biblical Mothers: Maternal Power in the Hebrew Bible* (Maryland: University Press of America, 2004), 31.

9. Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, Second. (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 25.

10. Walter Brueggemann, “2 Samuel 21-24: An Appendix of Deconstruction?,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (July 1988): 397.

11. William J. Dumbrell, “The Content and Significance of the Books of Samuel: Their Place and Purpose Within the Former Prophets,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33, no. 1 (March 1990): 51.

12. T. Desmond Alexander, “Royal Expectations in Genesis to Kings: Their Importance for Biblical Theology,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 49, no. 2, 191-212 (1998), 194-198.

13. Alexander, 198.

not only in the particular event of childbearing, but also on a larger scale in fulfillment of divine promises to Israel.¹⁴

Barren mother type scenes occur at significant points within the biblical narrative, alerting the reader to the impending provision of a male hero for Israel. Brueggemann notes that the barren-mother motif is important to “show that the monarchy arises in Israel *ex nihilo*, that is, as the singular gift of YHWH.”¹⁵ Furthermore, the phrase “the Lord had closed her womb” (1 Sam. 1:5-6) hints at divine action behind the scenes.¹⁶ However, Hannah's actions are at the forefront of the narrative: she petitions God directly, she prenatally dedicates her child to God, and, later on, she, and not her husband, takes the initiative in the ritual sacrifice. From her analysis of the barren mother type scenes¹⁷, Cook concludes that the Hannah-Samuel narrative stands out in its demonstration of the tension between human initiative and divine causality.¹⁸ Misunderstood by Eli the priest and lacking support from her husband Elkanah, ultimately, it is Hannah's actions that move God to action. The Lord who initially “closed her womb” (v.6) now “remembered her” (v.19) and she conceived and bore a son. Cook states, “Hannah stands in line with those who influenced the course of history by venturing to influence the divine plan. Her promise to God...resulted in the birth of Samuel, the reform of the priesthood, and the birth of the Israelite monarchy.”¹⁹

Hannah's Indelible Mark on Samuel

His growing up years set in the context of the corrupt house of Eli, the life of Samuel acts as the historian's critique of the Elides. This, however, does not begin with Samuel but with his mother Hannah. Hannah is set in contrast with Eli and his sons to critique the perverted priesthood.²⁰ As a mother, Hannah had great influence over her son, even though Samuel did not grow up under her roof. The naming of Hophni and Phinehas in the introduction of the birth narrative of Samuel seems irrelevant at first, “but points forward to the focus on proper and improper heirs to the priesthood in Samuel's story.”²¹ From 1 Sam. 2, the historian switches back and forth between accounts of the Elides' deplorable actions (2:12-17, 22-25, 27-36) and scenes of Samuel growing up in the temple (2:18-21, 26; 3:1, 3:19-4:1a), in somewhat rapid-fire fashion. Murphy describes this as “the simultaneous interplay of different story arcs,”

14. Joan E. Cook, *Hannah's Desire, God's Design: Early Interpretations of the Story of Hannah*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 282 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 10.

15. Brueggemann, 164-165.

16. Cook, 11.

17. Cook identifies three models of the barren mother type scenes: (1) the competition model (Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah), (2) the promise model (Sarah, Samson's mother, and Hannah), and (3) the request model (Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah). The first two models are associated with divine causality and human initiative is attributed to the third model. Hannah is the only woman who is associated with all three models. Cook, 14-25.

18. Ibid., 24.

19. Cook, 21.

20. Dumbrell, 50.

21. Robert Alter, *Ancient Israel: The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings: A Translation with Commentary*, First. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 242.

used by the historian as a way to “contrast the priesthood of Samuel with that of Eli’s sons, and as vividly as possible.”²²

The mothers of ancient Israel had significant influence within the context of their own households. As evidence for this, Bridge demonstrates that in the biblical text, mothers, more frequently than fathers, are depicted as naming their offspring.²³ Meyers states, “The role of women in giving names is apparently indicative of an authoritative social role, at least within the family setting, since the child receiving the name thereby comes under the influence of the namegiver.”²⁴ Mothers were not just responsible for childbearing, they were “cultural and spiritual educators of their children.”²⁵ Meyers argues that “the role of mothers as educators was arguably greater than that of fathers because women dominated the educative process in a child’s early years.”²⁶ While the text is not specific with the details regarding Samuel’s age when he was weaned and brought to the temple, scholars tend to estimate that he is between the age of three to five-years-old at the time.²⁷ It is not difficult to imagine that for however long that period of time was, Hannah was nurturing Samuel and playing a primary role in shaping his heart orientation toward God. Furthermore, after she leaves Samuel at the temple, she visits him every year, giving him the gift of a robe that she sews: something that would become a distinctive feature throughout his life and even after his death.²⁸ Bronner states, “This act alone demonstrates Hannah’s continued love and presumed influence in Samuel’s life. The success of Samuel’s career should attest to the truth of his mother’s influence.”²⁹

From the text, we can highlight three ways in which Hannah leaves an indelible mark on her son:

Single-hearted devotion to God

As Hannah’s song reveals, hers is a story of the reversal of fortunes. One can only imagine the extent of emotional torment she suffered at the hands of her rival Peninnah; and although her husband Elkanah loved her, his words and actions did nothing to assuage her grief. That her rival, who had several children, “provoke[d] her grievously” (1 Sam. 1:6) over a period of several years, explains her deep distress and bitter weeping (1 Sam. 1:10). Given the often economical and patriarchal context of biblical narrative, it is rare to encounter women speaking for themselves³⁰; thus, it is

22. Francesca Aran Murphy, *1 Samuel*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 24.

23. Edward J. Bridge, “A Mother’s Influence: Mothers Naming Children in the Hebrew Bible,” *Vetus Testamentum* 64 (2014), 390-392.

24. Carol Meyers, “The Hannah Narrative in Feminist Perspective,” in *Go to the Land I Will Show You: Studies in Honor of Dwight W. Young*, ed. Joseph E. Coleson (Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1996), *The Hannah Narrative*, 121.

25. Bronner, 29.

26. Carol Meyers, “Women’s Lives,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Ancient Israel*, ed. Susan Niditch (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 421.

27. II Maccabees 7:27 mentions a weaning period of three years.

28. Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 250.

29. Bronner, 32.

30. Lindsay Freeman in *Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter* estimates that only 1.2 percent of the words in the Bible are spoken by women.

significant that Hannah is given a considerable amount of dialogue within the narrative.³¹ Alter explains that the biblical writers primarily used dialogue to draw attention to important narrative events, and a character's first reported speech is of particular significance.³² Consequently, it is compelling that, despite Peninnah's incessant provocations³³ and Elkanah's well-meaning but futile attempts to comfort her, Hannah does not respond to either of them. Her first recorded speech is directed to God himself, and is not mediated by the priest, Eli, who is sitting close by. Perhaps Hannah is cognizant that her deliverance will not come from a human source, even if it is familial and loving (i.e. Elkanah), or ecclesiastical/political (i.e. Eli and his sons).³⁴ Thus, Hannah is representative of those who acknowledge God as Deliverer and King over the people; something that Samuel himself is deeply aware of.

During this time, the Israelites were not practicing monotheists, or wholeheartedly serving the Lord, as was made clear from the period of the Judges. Drawing from archaeological findings, Murphy concludes that "Israel's empirical religion was syncretistic, offering worship to both Yahweh and Asherah."³⁵ Worship of Asherah, the Canaanite fertility goddess, "included rituals for childbirth, sacred *marzeah* feasts, pilgrimages, saints days, baking cakes for Asherah the "Queen of Heaven" to ensure fertility."³⁶ That Hannah brought her petition directly to the Lord is evidence of her single-hearted devotion and the fidelity of her worship of God, which set her apart from the community of Israel. Her actions were a direct critique of Eli's "worthless" sons who "did not know the Lord" (1 Sam. 2:12) and who "lay with the women who were serving at the entrance to the tent of meeting" (1 Sam. 2:22). Later on, Samuel himself would call the people of Israel to "put away" their Baals and Asherahs and return to single-hearted worship of the Lord (1 Sam. 7:3-4).

Sacrificial life

Hannah tells Elkanah that she will bring Samuel to the presence of the Lord when "the child (נֶעָר) is weaned." Alter notes that *na'ar* (נֶעָר) is "quite often a tender designation of a young son...this usage surely intimates the powerful biological bond between Hannah and the longed-for baby and thus points to the pain of separation she

31. In Freeman's count of the NRSV, Hannah speaks 474 words, second to the Shulammitte woman in the Song of Solomon who speaks 1,425 words. In contrast, Sarah speaks only 141 words.

32. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 227.

33. Amit notes "that the disproportion in the distribution of sacrificial portions and the anger that Peninnah caused Hannah were not isolated incidents, but rather, regularly recurring phenomena." Yairah Amit, "'Am I Not More Devoted to You than Ten Sons?'" (1 Samuel 1.8): Male and Female Interpretations," in *Feminist Companion to Samuel-Kings*, *Feminist Companion to the Bible* 5 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 68–76.

34. T. Ishida argues in *The Royal Dynasties in Ancient Israel: A Study on the Formation and Development of Royal-Dynastic Ideology* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977) that the shrine at Shiloh was the 'centre of the confederation of the Israelite tribes at the time.' If so, Eli was not merely a priest, he functioned as the leader of the confederation of tribes at Shiloh at the time, making him a 'priest-judge.' Thus, when Samuel became judge of Israel, it was as 'Eli's legitimate successor.' This idea of leadership succession is further evidenced by Samuel making his sons judges when he became old (1 Sam. 8:1), pp. 32-34.

35. Murphy, 4.

36. Ibid.

must accept.”³⁷ Although both Elkanah and Hannah are present at the sacrifice, it is clear that Hannah takes the lead (1 Sam. 1:24-25) in the sacrifice. 1 Sam. 1:25 demonstrates that the bull and the lad are parallel sacrifices to the Lord, and Murphy states, “Given away at weaning by Hannah, Samuel is called to a life of self-dispossession.”³⁸ Murphy calls Hannah’s act a “hard maternal sacrifice”³⁹ which is in stark contrast to Hophni and Phinehas who desecrated the sacrifices to the Lord.

For a mother to give up a child for a life of service can be considered altruism of the highest order, particularly if it is a child whom one has desired “year by year” (1 Sam. 1:7). What the reader might miss, however, is the introduction of Hophni and Phinehas early on in the narrative as the priests of the Lord at Shiloh, where Elkanah and his family would go to worship every year. This picture would put Hannah’s sacrifice in even starker light. For a mother as pious and devoted as Hannah to leave her son in an environment where the worship of the Lord was corrupt, would require even greater trust in God. Meyers writes, “Hannah’s sacrifice signifies an instance of female activity, albeit related to maternal functions, with national implications. By the very individuality of her characterization and behavior, she is represented as contributing to the corporate welfare of ancient Israel.”⁴⁰

Prayer

In 1 Samuel, the word “pray” (פָּלַל) is associated with Hannah five times, with Hannah being the subject of the verb. The only other person in 1 Samuel who is the subject of the verb “pray” (פָּלַל) is Samuel himself.⁴¹ Hannah’s prayer has been carefully passed down by the Rabbis in Jewish tradition as a model for prayer.⁴² Bronner describes Hannah as being “viewed as a Mother of Prayer, instructing the faithful on how to request God’s favor.”⁴³ It is no wonder then, that Samuel himself is a man of prayer. In 1 Samuel 4, in the battle with the Philistines, Hophni and Phinehas bring out the ark as a ‘good-luck charm’ in their effort to win the battle, only to lose the battle and the ark to the enemy. By the beginning of Chapter 7, the ark is returned to Israel, but in another battle with the Philistines in the same chapter, Samuel does not use the ark in similar fashion. He instead prays (פָּלַל) to the Lord (1 Sam. 7.5). The Lord miraculously aids Israel in battle, and “the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel” (1 Sam. 7.13). Again, as a critique of the Elides, the only other occurrences of the verb “pray” (פָּלַל) in 1 Samuel are in Eli’s futile rebuke of his sons, warning them of the impending judgement of the Lord; a warning which they ignored (1 Sam. 2:25).

In the birth narrative, Hannah’s inner prayer is emblematic of a heart that is devoted to the Lord, casting a forward glance toward 1 Sam. 16:7 when the Lord says to Samuel, “For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance,

37. Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 245.

38. Murphy, 30.

39. Ibid., 18.

40. Meyers, *The Hannah Narrative*, 126.

41. Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, vol. 10, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 8.

42. Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 215.

43. Bronner, 34.

but the Lord looks at the heart.” Perhaps Hannah herself provides for us the model of a godly king.⁴⁴ The climax of Samuel’s birth narrative is found in Hannah’s song in chapter 2. Hannah’s inward petition has burst into outward praise. It is noteworthy that Hannah’s song of exultation comes in response to her giving Samuel away at the temple, rather than when she conceived or when Samuel was born.⁴⁵ Her song in chapter 2, though shorter, has enough similarities with David’s song in 2 Sam. 22 that many scholars consider both these songs as an inclusion to the books of Samuel. Polzin writes:

If David is king *par excellence* in the books of Samuel, and if his hymn of praise in 2 Samuel 22 recalls his rise to power in the face of Saul’s opposition, then perhaps we may be justified in hearing the prefiguring voice of a victorious king in the Song of Hannah, in concise harmony and counterpoint with its longer version at the end of 2 Samuel. The emotive and ideological features present in the character zones of both Hannah and David through the songs placed in their mouths unite their voices in a striking way...In this way the voice of a triumphant king merges with that of an exultant mother.⁴⁶

Thus, the historian accords this triumphant barren mother the royal honor of heralding the future king. An exemplar to the Israelite community and its future kings, Hannah’s piety and sacrificial devotion to God set up the trajectory for the birth of the monarchy.

III. ABIGAIL: THE SHREWD SISTER

Abigail is courageously decisive and action-oriented, a shrewd princess who circumvents a dangerous situation with her artful negotiation skills. Through the course of 1 Samuel 25, David recedes from the foreground and Abigail emerges as the primary interest of the historian in this narrative. Her words and actions not only save the day for her household and for David; she makes prophetic statements leading to her becoming identified as one of seven female prophets by the rabbinic tradition.

Abigail is characterized in direct contrast to her husband Nabal. Where Nabal, whose name aptly means “fool,” is “harsh and badly behaved,” Abigail is “discerning and beautiful” (1 Sam. 25:3). Nabal is not just any fool, however, he is an extremely wealthy Calebite. On feast day, David sends ten of his men to respectfully ask Nabal for provisions for his band of men, citing how David’s men had protected Nabal’s servants and flocks while out in the fields as justification for his request. Nabal angrily disdains David’s request. This prompts David to fly into a rage himself and he orders his men, four hundred of them, to strap on their swords and prepare to annihilate all the males of Nabal’s household. When Abigail is informed of the impending disaster, she moves quickly to intercept David and his men.

Nabal is the epitome of a fool. Levenson points out that Nabal’s name itself characterizes him and is “a form of character assassination.” He says, “The Hebrew

44. Brueggemann notes: “David becomes the approved king because he has become more like Hannah.” Brueggemann, *II Samuel 21-24*, 397.

45. Hamilton, 217.

46. Robert Polzin, *Samuel and Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History, Part Two: 1 Samuel* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1989), 33.

word *nâbâl*, often translated as ‘fool,’ designates not a harmless simpleton, but rather a vicious, materialistic, and egocentric misfit,” and suggests Nabal is not his real name but that his name was “changed for the purposes of characterization.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, both his servant and Abigail unequivocally call him a “worthless man” (1 Sam. 25:17) and “worthless fellow” (1 Sam. 25:25), suggesting that Nabal’s reputation, at least within his own household, was undisputed. The hyperbolic characterization is meant to draw a sharp contrast to the wit and skill of Abigail. The text describes her as beautiful, but she is far from being merely a pretty face. She is the perfect counterpoint to the epitome of the Fool.

Meyers, in her extensive examination into the lives of ancient Israelite women, decries the common perception of these women as merely subservient housewives. She describes the typical woman “of the agrarian settlements of ancient Israel...as a woman with considerable agency and power, a complement to her spouse in carrying out the myriad tasks of an agrarian household—hardly a subservient, passive, and inferior housewife.”⁴⁸ In this narrative, however, Abigail is a foil, rather than a complement, to her spouse. Given what the text reveals about the magnitude of Nabal’s wealth and property, Abigail’s managerial responsibilities would have been extensive and equivalent to that of a Chief Operating Officer today.⁴⁹ The fact that the servant goes to Abigail with a report of what happened and a request for her to do something about the situation, shows the level of respect and authority she commanded in the household. The servant does not tell Abigail what to do, but instead says, “Now therefore know this and consider what you should do” (1 Sam. 25:17), indicating that she was deemed intelligent and resourceful enough to handle the situation.⁵⁰ Yet again, a contrast is made between the confidence the servant places in Abigail’s leadership and his lack of confidence in Nabal’s. Levenson notes how the narrator sets Abigail up as a ‘perfect match’ for David here. The servants look to Abigail “with exactly the confidence which they despair of placing in her husband. Her relationship to the servants is much more like that of David to his men, one characterized by mutuality and solidarity.”⁵¹ Solvang proposes that, “Abigail’s behavior as household manager is connected to David’s future role as king,” because her actions not only “preserve David’s future kingship. They also provide a model for wise kingship.”⁵² If we consider Abigail’s actions as a model for wise kingship, then she becomes a foil not just to Nabal, but to David himself.

The Art of Abigail’s Diplomacy

Although Abigail immediately gathers food and provisions for David’s men to appease him, it is not this gift that changes David’s mind, but the gift of her discernment

47. Jon D. Levenson, “1 Samuel 25 as Literature and History,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978), 13.

48. Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 203.

49. *Ibid.*, 188.

50. Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 388.

51. Levenson, 18.

52. Elna K. Solvang, *A Woman’s Place Is in the House: Royal Women of Judah and Their Involvement in the House of David*, vol. 349, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 98.

and diplomacy. In an act of courageous self-abandon, she rides on a donkey toward a throng of four hundred men readied for battle under the leadership of an enraged giant-killer and future king and throws herself at his feet. While Nabal is condescending toward David from his position of greater wealth and status,⁵³ Abigail humbles herself before David in anticipation of his future royal status. She refers to David as “my lord” fourteen times and to herself as “your servant” five times. Abigail distances herself from her husband by reiterating that he is a fool and a “worthless fellow,” and from his actions by explaining that she did not see the young men that David sent (1 Sam. 25:25). She tells David to lay all the guilt on her, yet also “makes it clear that she does not share Nabal’s guilt in refusing payment to David’s men.”⁵⁴

When Abigail distances herself from Nabal, she situates herself on David’s side, not just in the David-Nabal conflict, but in the overall scheme of things.⁵⁵ Nabal refuses to recognize who David is, calling him a servant who has broken away from his master. But Abigail becomes the one who breaks away from her “master,” and acknowledges who David is by announcing his kingly destiny. In doing so, Abigail reminds David of who he is: the one chosen by God to rule over Israel (1 Sam. 25:30), and artfully implies that godly kings do not act in the way he is about to. Cleverly alluding to his battle with Goliath (“the lives of your enemies he shall sling out as from the hollow of a sling,” 1 Sam. 25:29), and cognizant of his fleeing from Saul (“men rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living in the care of the Lord your God,” 1 Sam. 25:29), she reminds David of who he was and who he should be: one who does not taint his hands with “blood[shed] without cause” and “work[s] salvation himself” (v31), but trusts in the Lord for deliverance and vengeance over his enemies.⁵⁶ Murphy writes, “This proverbial woman has reminded David that he *can* show mercy, because his strength is not his own, but the Lord’s. The law of recompense of evil for evil, good for good, is not abrogated, but left in the hands of God. So David can and must be merciful.”⁵⁷ As a result, David comes to his senses and listens to her. Abigail saves her household from annihilation, and she saves David from the consequences of having murderous bloodguilt on his hand.

Abigail presses the issue of divine agency several times. Even though she is the one who restrains David from violence, she begins her speech with, “because the Lord has restrained you from bloodguilt” (1 Sam. 25:26). In this way, she identifies herself as an agent of the Lord, and David recognizes her as such (“the God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me,” 1 Sam. 25:32). At the end of her speech, she is careful to secure her future by adding the clause, “then remember your servant” (1 Sam. 25:31). True to her word, when Nabal dies (again it is said that “the Lord struck Nabal,” 1 Sam.

53. Levenson notes that “the man whose name has been altered to Nabal must have been a very powerful figure in the Calebite clan of his day. If his three thousand sheep and one thousand goats (1 Sam 25:2) are not a gross exaggeration, then it was perfectly true that his feast was “fit for a king” (v 36), for he must have been at the pinnacle of social status...Note, too, that Abigail has no fewer than five ladies-in-waiting (1 Sam 25:42). Obviously, Nabal was no commoner,” *1 Samuel 25 as Literature and History*, p. 26.

54. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 319.

55. *Ibid.*, 320.

56. Murphy, 241.

57. *Ibid.*, 242.

25:38), David sends for her to be his wife. Levenson proposes that David's marriage to Abigail has political importance when he ascends to the throne at Hebron in 2 Sam. 2:1-4. In that narrative, Abigail is named as "the widow of Nabal of Carmel" (2 Sam. 2:2). Perhaps Nabal was a powerful Calebite chieftain (indeed, his wealth was evidence of it), making Abigail a "prominent Calebite woman."⁵⁸ Therefore, Levenson suggests, David, in his marriage to Abigail, becomes the successor to Nabal the Calebite, thus legitimizing his claim to the throne at Hebron.⁵⁹

Abigail: A Prophetess?

Rabbinic tradition places Abigail as one of seven female prophets in the Hebrew Bible even though she never formally held the office. Levenson notes that the text does not "present Abigail as a prophetess in the narrower sense," but the historian "does mean her to be a woman of providence, a person who, in this case from intelligence (*śekel*, v 3) rather than from special revelation, senses the drift of history, and... rides the crest of the providential wave into personal success."⁶⁰ Frymer-Kensky classifies Abigail as an "oracle," not strictly a prophet like the court prophets or the literary prophets, but still one who "convey[s] the will of God." Like Hannah before her, Abigail is a 'onetime' prophet who "mark[s] and participate[s] in the making of Israel's history."⁶¹ Abigail proves herself to be an oracle with these words:

"let your enemies and those who seek to do evil to my lord be as Nabal." (1 Sam. 25:26)

This could be construed as an ominous prediction of Nabal's death and perhaps extrapolated to Saul's death. Again, Abigail's words have power: after she tells him of the averted disaster, Nabal's "heart died within him, and he became as a stone" (1 Sam. 25:37). The use of the word "stone" here also calls to mind her earlier words that God would cause David's enemies to "sling out as from the hollow of a sling" (1 Sam. 25:29). Polzin observes the parallels between Saul and Nabal and concludes that Nabal is a Saul figure.⁶² When Nabal becomes "as a stone", Polzin concludes, "the allusive circle is complete: David's enemy has been slung out like a stone from his sling, an allusion to David's victory over Saul much as over Goliath."⁶³

58. Levenson, 25.

59. Ibid., 25-28. See also Jon D. Levenson and Baruch Halpern, "The Political Import of David's Marriages," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99, no. 4 (December 1980): 507-518.

60. Ibid., 20.

61. Frymer-Kensky, 327-328.

62. Robert Polzin notes that Nabal is a "similar object of mercy" to Saul in the surrounding chapters of 24 and 26; Abigail wishes that David's enemies (i.e. Saul) "be as Nabal." And David "curiously refers to himself as David's son." *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 210-11.

63. Polzin, 212.

“And when the Lord...appointed you prince over Israel” (1 Sam. 25:30)

Abigail predicts that David will be a “prince” (נגיד) over Israel, the first one to use the title (instead of “king” מלך, 1 Sam. 24:20) for David, which indicates his divinely-designated role (1 Sam. 13:14; 25:30; 2 Sam. 5:1-2).⁶⁴

“For the Lord will certainly make my lord a sure house” (1 Sam. 25:28)

Abigail is the first to predict that God will make David a “sure house,” using the language of the man of God in 1 Sam. 2:35 when he conveys God’s judgment on the house of Eli and prefiguring the language of Nathan in 2 Sam. 7:16 who conveys the Lord’s everlasting covenant with David. Solvang notes that Abigail’s marriage to David seals his separation from the house of Saul and that “the wisdom of Abigail will be the starting point of David’s new house.”⁶⁵

“this will not cause grief or a troubled heart to my lord...by having shed blood without cause” (1 Sam. 25:31, NASB)

Does “this” cast a dark glimpse toward David’s actions with Uriah? Levenson argues that there are enough similarities between this narrative and that of 2 Sam. 11-12 that “one cannot read one without recalling the other. In both cases and them alone, David moves to kill a man and to marry his wife,”⁶⁶ except that here only, David is providentially restrained through the actions of Abigail.⁶⁷ Abigail seems to ominously anticipate that “David’s shedding of innocent blood [will be] to his downfall.”⁶⁸

Scholars have pointed to the intentional placement of this narrative between the two accounts of David sparing Saul’s life in chapters 24 and 26. From 1 Samuel 16, David is portrayed as having all the necessary ingredients for the ideal king. However, the insertion of this account between chapters 24 and 26 reveals that David is perhaps not merely a one-sided character but is capable of ruthless violence and allowing his passions to get the better of him.⁶⁹ Murphy affirms, “David has fully become David, dark and light...we, know now...that David is a many-sided man.”⁷⁰ Abigail not only successfully restrains David, she ensures that his ascension is not tarnished by

64. Frymer-Kensky, 320. For detailed analysis on the differentiation between מלך and נגיד, see Tomoo Ishida, *The Royal Dynasties in Ancient Israel: A Study on the Formation and Development of Royal-Dynastic Ideology*, ed. John Barton and Reinhard G. Kratz, vol. 142, Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft Ser. (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1977); and Jeong Bong Kim and D J Human, “Nagid: A Re-Examination in the Light of the Royal Ideology in the Ancient Near East,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 64, no. 3 (July 1, 2008): 1475–1497.

65. Solvang, 98.

66. Levenson, 24.

67. Schwartz observes that in the David-Bathsheba account, in a reversal of roles, David becomes the Fool. “The king is as greedy as Nabal had been, and he denies his neighbor what is rightfully his, as Nabal had denied David provisions from his livestock and hospitality.” Schwartz, 344.

68. Ibid., 23.

69. Brueggemann, 168.

70. Murphy, 244.

unrighteous bloodshed; and David's kingship, for the time being, continues on its intended course.

IV. BATHSHEBA: WHO IS SHE

Bathsheba is one the most famous women of the Old Testament, and yet one of the most misunderstood. At her best, she is read as a weak woman who is unable to stand up to the king's advances; at her worst, and perhaps more commonly, she is depicted as a seductress: a loose, immoral adulteress who schemed her way into the king's bed. The reason for such wide-ranging interpretations of Bathsheba arise from the fact that the historian uses extremely terse narrative to describe the happenings up till Bathsheba discovers she is pregnant, and even afterward, little or no information is given about her emotions or her reactions to what David did to her and her husband.⁷¹

Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11

Levenson notes, "just as Abigail feared, David's shedding of innocent blood was to be his downfall. The David whom we glimpsed ominously but momentarily in 1 Samuel 25 dominates the pivotal episode of Bathsheba and Uriah."⁷² The David and Bathsheba narrative marks a major turning point in David's kingship. Barron writes:

For indeed, practically everything that follows in 2 Samuel is conditioned by this epic fall from grace. David wrestled with this sin for the rest of his life, and both his public and private affairs were permanently marked by it. More importantly, Israel was changed for the worse by this event, in a manner analogous to the change for the worse visited upon the human race by the sin of Adam.⁷³

The story of David and Bathsheba reminds us that the historian is not interested in whitewashing David, but in communicating that how kings act in relation to covenantal law have wide-ranging implications on the larger community of Israel. It is here that the warnings of Samuel in 1 Sam. 8:11-18 come reverberating back through time: "he will take your sons...he will take your daughters..." The phrase "he will take" occurs six times, anticipating the king's abuse of power and authority, subjecting those under his rule to his whims and fancies. Solvang argues that "the theme underlying this story is not sex...but the royal power to 'take'" and that "David's taking of Bathsheba is clearly a betrayal of the nation and of the king's covenant leadership."⁷⁴ Due to the paucity of dialogue and narration accorded to Bathsheba in 2 Sam. 11, many have taken to interpreting her character in a negative light. This is perhaps also in the interest of preserving David's untainted track record. Koenig notes, "Bathsheba in particular threatens a specific theological picture of David as the supreme human ruler of

71. Polzin notes that the deliberate omission of essential details is a narrative device used by the narrator.

72. Levenson, 23.

73. Robert Barron, *2 Samuel*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 95.

74. Solvang, 133.

Israel...it has, in some cases, been important to devalue Bathsheba in order to maintain a high view of David.”⁷⁵

If we consider Alter’s principle that dialogue is used in biblical narrative to convey the importance of an event, then the Bathsheba story is in stark contrast to that of Hannah or of Abigail; most of the words spoken in chapters 11 and 12 are spoken by the men. It is perhaps the narrator’s intention to communicate using reticence and silence to create greater tension in the narrative and cause the reader to judge David’s actions. Bathsheba only speaks two words: “I’m pregnant” (2 Sam. 11:5). On the surface, it is tempting to read over those words as a means of informing the reader that Bathsheba has become pregnant by David. However, considering Alter’s “rule” of dialogue,⁷⁶ it is significant that the historian chooses to present this information in the form of dialogue. With those two words, in a foreshadowing of Nathan’s confrontation of David, Bathsheba calls David to account for his actions toward her. It is a reminder that one’s sins, especially those of a God-appointed ruler, eventually come to light. It is also significant that David does not respond to Bathsheba in dialogue. The following narrative, however, frames his response to her. David does everything he should not do: he tries to cover up his sin by attempting to put the responsibility of paternity on his trusted warrior Uriah, and when that fails, he arranges to have Uriah killed. With sinister similarity to Nabal’s death resulting in David obtaining his wife Abigail, Uriah is killed, and David obtains Bathsheba as his wife. In both deaths, it appears as if David was not directly responsible. In Nabal’s case, it is said that the Lord struck Nabal (1 Sam. 25:38); but in Uriah’s case, although he is killed in battle, the narrator is clear that David is directly responsible for his death (2 Sam. 12:9). Finally, the historian makes the statement of judgment he has been withholding throughout the narrative: “the thing David had done displeased the Lord” (2 Sam. 11:27). Although the text is ambiguous on the extent of Bathsheba’s complicity in the adultery, this statement of blame on David exonerates her at least from those accusations of being a seductress who willfully lured David into sin.⁷⁷ The only statement revealing Bathsheba’s emotions is in 2 Sam. 11:26, describing her lament over Uriah’s death. Solvang writes, “it draws attention to her position as victim of David’s sending for her and of his sending Uriah to his death...like the lament of Rizpah in a subsequent chapter (2 Sam. 21:10-14), Bathsheba’s lament functions as a judgment against royal violence directed at women and their families. Like Rizpah’s lament it is followed by divine intervention.”⁷⁸

In the 2 Sam. 11-12 narrative, Bathsheba is never characterized simply as “Bathsheba” but is constantly portrayed through her relationships with others, particularly the male characters. She is described as the “daughter of Eliam” (one time, 2 Sam. 11:3), the “wife of Uriah the Hittite” (four times, 2 Sam. 11:3, 26; 12:10, 15) and as David’s wife (2 Sam. 11:27; 12:24). Eliam and Uriah are counted in David’s inner

75. Sara M. Koenig, *Isn’t This Bathsheba?: A Study in Characterization*, vol. 177, Princeton Theological Monograph (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2011), 5.

76. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 227.

77. Furthermore, Koenig draws attention to the punishment for adultery in Deut 22:22: Both man and woman are to be punished. But in this case, David alone appears to bear the punishment. Koenig, 69.

78. Solvang, 134.

circle of men in 2 Sam. 23, and thus these relational epithets only serve to highlight the magnitude of David's sin and betrayal all the more.⁷⁹

The historian does not present a "clean" David here, because the historian primarily wants to communicate that obedience brings blessing and disobedience brings judgment. The king is meant to model for the community what it means to live in covenantal relationship with God, and he is not above the law. If the king abuses his authority and trespasses, he will be subject to divine judgment. Thus, from here on, the problems with David's rule are evident. The reader gets the sense that even though he receives the forgiveness of the Lord for his genuine repentance, he never quite recovers from the consequences of his actions. His actions do not just have implications for himself, Uriah, Bathsheba, and his child who died; the consequences of his actions reverberate throughout the nation.⁸⁰ However, a glimmer of hope is seen in Solomon's birth sequence. After their first child dies, Bathsheba bears a son, and the Lord himself, through Nathan, renames the child Jedidiah, which means "beloved of the Lord" (2 Sam. 12:25). This name might hint towards Solomon being God's choice as David's successor, as we will see later on. As Jedidiah (יְדִידְיָהּ), he is "God's David (דָּוִד)," pointing to God's redemptive purposes in the midst of human sin and brokenness. Bathsheba is the victim of the king, the mighty one who has asserted his authority in a wrongful way. Jedidiah, the "beloved of the Lord," reminds the reader that God reverses the fortunes of the weak and elevates them. That Nathan brings the message of his God-given name is significant, since the future partnership of Nathan and Bathsheba ensures Solomon's ascension to the throne.

Bathsheba in 1 Kings

After Solomon is born, Bathsheba disappears from the narrative only to reemerge at yet another key transition of Israel's history—the transition between David's and Solomon's reign—a time of succession. Koenig demonstrates that, as a character, Bathsheba has developed over the course of time.⁸¹ She identifies four main ways in which Bathsheba has changed in 1 Kings: first, she has more speech and action; second, she has a growing level of authority; third, she is no longer characterized by her physical appearance, which indicates it is of secondary importance in this narrative; fourth, she is known as "mother," instead of "wife" or "daughter."⁸² Alter notes, "Whereas the beautiful young wife was accorded no dialogue except for her report to David of her pregnancy, the mature Bathsheba will show herself a mistress of language—shrewd, energetic, politically astute."⁸³

79. Alter notes: "when a relational epithet is attached to a character...the narrator is generally telling us something substantive without recourse to explicit commentary." Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 224.

80. Regina M. Schwartz, notes the interwovenness of politics and sexuality in the text: the private acts of a leader have public consequences; Regina M. Schwartz, "Adultery in the House of David: The Metanarrative of Biblical Scholarship and the Narratives of the Bible," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Rutledge, 1999), 343.

81. Koenig, 77.

82. Ibid., 78-79.

83. Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 600.

David is now depicted as weak and unaware of what is going on in his kingdom. Bathsheba is crucial, at this point, in ensuring that Solomon, the “beloved of the Lord,” becomes king in David’s place. Although Nathan prompts her to go to David and coaches her in what to say, she makes certain changes in her speech that indicate that she is “neither his puppet nor his parrot, but acts with her own initiative and intelligence.”⁸⁴ Bathsheba’s speech is direct, which demonstrates a level of authority and influence, and she succeeds in pulling David out of his weakened state, like Abigail before her,⁸⁵ to perform his last act as king: to publicly appoint his successor. Nowhere in Samuel or Kings are we told that David made the vow to Bathsheba concerning her son but perhaps the description in Solomon’s birth narrative that “the Lord loved him” (2 Sam. 12:24) and Solomon’s theophanic dream (1 Kings 3:5) are hints that Solomon was God’s choice all along.

Bathsheba’s authority blossoms further after Solomon becomes king. Adonijah approaches her to ask for Abishag as his wife, thus acknowledging Bathsheba as having authority to speak to the king on his behalf (1 Kings 2:17). Adonijah represents yet another male that seeks to use Bathsheba for his own purposes. It would be politically advantageous for Adonijah to have his father’s mistress, Abishag, as his wife. He makes his petition through Bathsheba, perhaps thinking that she would not see the significance of his request. However, given the political intelligence she displayed in her dialogue with David, it is possible that she saw through his request and her conveyance of the “one small request” (v.20) gives Solomon due course to eliminate a legitimate threat to his rule. Thus, her son secures his throne. At the height of her authority, Solomon, the king himself, in greeting her, rises from his throne, bows to her, and allows her to sit at his right hand by his throne. She is given the highest recognition here: “the king’s mother” (1 Kings 2:19).⁸⁶

Bathsheba is a difficult character to wrestle with, because, unlike Hannah and Abigail, her dialogue and actions are sparse within the text. The historian, however, does not view her as unimportant. She transitions from being a victim and symbol of David’s abuse of kingly power into a woman of influence who ensures that Solomon, the “beloved of the Lord,”⁸⁷ continues David’s legacy and God’s plan for the monarchy.

V. RIZPAH: THE MOURNING MOTHER

During the time of civil war between the House of Saul and the House of David, Rizpah, Saul’s concubine, is first introduced in 2 Sam. 3:7. In this brief mention, she is emblematic of the struggle for power and control in the kingdom during the time of the uneasy reign of Saul’s son, Ish-bosheth. Here, she is being used by men grasping for power as a pawn to achieve their means. She is not mentioned again until 2 Sam. 21, in a section of the book (chapters 21-24) that many scholars traditionally regard as appendices—disparate in literary style and in theological grounding—to the end of

84. Koenig, 92.

85. Alice Bach, “Signs of the Flesh: Observations on Characterization in the Bible,” in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Rutledge, 1999), 361.

86. Niels-Erik A. Andreasen proposes that the queen mother holds “a significant official political position superseded only by that of the king himself.” See Niels-Erik A. Andreasen, “The Role of the Queen Mother in Israelite Society,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45, 179-194 (1983).

87. David in 1 Chron 28:5 states that Solomon was chosen by God to rule.

Samuel. Many choose to skim over this story of David and the Gibeonites for this very reason, but perhaps even more so because the story raises uneasy questions about the true nature of David's motives and, Cheryl Exum suggests, of God's nature as well.⁸⁸ More recent scholarship has shown that although chapters 21 to 24 appear to be written by different authors with obvious differences from the main corpus of the David story, this section exhibits "compositional coherence" with "significant links with the preceding narrative."⁸⁹ Alter reminds readers that "creating a collage of disparate sources was an established literary technique used by the ancient Hebrew editors and sometimes by the original writers themselves" and even points to the chiasmic structure of this section.⁹⁰

The reader is told that the three-year famine is a result of bloodguilt on Saul's part, because he had reneged on the covenant with the Gibeonites and tried to kill them. Divine favor or judgment was very much tied to the land. Famine, pestilence, or drought indicated the judgment of God as a result of the sin of the leaders and the people of Israel.⁹¹ Solvang writes, "Famine is an indication of the withdrawal of divine favor as a consequence of sin; fertility is a blessing brought to the land through righteous rule."⁹² One might recall a parallel phrase in the opening of the book of Ruth: "In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land" (Ruth 1:1). This description is not merely an anecdotal remark but meant to cast judgment on the rule of the judges. In similar manner, there is a possibility of another layer of interpreting this event in 2 Sam. 21, and Solvang proposes that a "famine in the days of David" (2 Sam. 21:1) is "an unmistakable critique of the effect of David's reign on the land of Israel."⁹³ Just as the problems with Saul's leadership throw the stability of the land off-balance, the placement of this narrative after the rebellion sequences, which come as a result of David's sin with Bathsheba and Uriah, might cast a negative light on David's rule.⁹⁴

In familiar fashion, David is described as inquiring of the Lord in response to the famine. However, what is glaringly missing here is the lack of instruction from God to David concerning what to do next. David seeks the Lord for the reasons behind the famine but, for the resolution to the problem, he seeks out the Gibeonites, something God does not tell him to do. David pushes the Gibeonites to state their terms for the resolution of the matter, but he uses the word "atone" (2 Sam. 21:3), which Solvang observes as "striking because the customary direction of appeasement is toward God. It is Yahweh who must be satisfied and who determines the level of atonement

88. Cheryl Exum, "Rizpah," *Word & World* XVII, no. 3 (Summer 1997), 260.

89. Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 559.

90. Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 559. Alter outlines the chiasmic structure as follows: "a story of a national calamity in which David intercedes; a list (Chapter 21); a poem (Chapter 22); a poem; a list (Chapter 23); a story of a national calamity in which David intercedes (Chapter 24)."

91. Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple clearly points to this interrelation between blessing and the land (1 Kgs. 8:35-40).

92. Solvang, 105.

93. *Ibid.*

94. Psalm 72 highlights the impact of righteous and just rule to the prosperity and *shalom* of the nation. Routledge writes: "Here it is the spiritual, moral, social and material well-being that derives from the just and righteous run of a king who reigns on God's behalf. The righteous conduct of the king brings blessing - and even enables the corn to grow (v. 16). This follows from the link between the political and cosmic structures, and the idea that the harmony of the created order depends upon the king fulfilling his judicial responsibility." Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

required.”⁹⁵ In a move laced with heavy notes of irony, David submits himself to those who are “not of the people of Israel” (2 Sam. 21:2) and who “have no place in all the territory of Israel” (2 Sam. 21:5) and accords them the ‘power’ to declare restitution and bring blessing on “the heritage of the Lord” (2 Sam. 21:3). In Joshua 9:14-15, the Israelites failed to seek the counsel of the Lord concerning making the covenant with the Gibeonites which resulted in a covenant they could not renege on. Here, David has not sought the Lord for the resolution of the matter and is putting the matter in the hands of the Gibeonites.⁹⁶ Once again, the Gibeonites exhibit the same cunning that was used to their advantage in Joshua 9 and state that “it is not a matter of silver or gold between us and Saul or his house; neither is it for us to put any man to death in Israel” (2 Sam. 21:4). Alter argues, “The second clause is really an opening ploy in negotiation: they say they have no claim to execute any Israelite...suggesting that they are waiting for David to agree to hand Israelites over to them in expiation of Saul’s crime.”⁹⁷ David readily hands two sons of Rizpah and five sons of Merab, Saul’s daughter, over to the Gibeonites to be sacrificed. This is in contrast to the David who, while being pursued by Saul, is “scrupulously presented as refusing to cooperate in the murders of anyone in the household of Saul.”⁹⁸

Almost too conveniently, the sons of Saul, and therefore the remaining legitimate successors to Saul’s house, are taken care of,⁹⁹ in a manner reminiscent of Nabal and Uriah, without the blood being on David’s hands. Does David not see the handing over of Saul’s sons as going back on the oath that he swore to Saul in 1 Sam. 24:21 not to “cut off [his] offspring?” Perhaps he sees the burden of responsibility for their deaths to be in the hands of the Gibeonites. Perhaps he considers the national covenant to the Gibeonites as superseding his personal oath made while being pursued by Saul. Or perhaps he considers the sparing of Mephibosheth in keeping with his covenant to Jonathan as extrapolated to the keeping of his oath to Saul. The Saulides are killed together in ritualistic fashion “before the Lord” (2 Sam. 21:9). Barron asks, “Did...the ritual killing of seven young men in answer to Saul’s slaughter of the Gibeonites—in fact satisfy God’s anger and contribute thereby to the reestablishment of the order of nature? Does the God of Israel truly respond to or sanction this sort of primitive calculus?”¹⁰⁰ The fact that the death of the Saulides does not result in the end of the famine clues the reader to what God does or does not constitute as acceptable sacrifice.

The stark words of David, “I will give them” (2 Sam. 21:6), are the last words of dialogue in this narrative.¹⁰¹ Then, Rizpah enters the scene. Exum notes, “Whereas the most narrative space is devoted to the dialogue between David and the Gibeonites...the narrative power is concentrated in the account of Rizpah’s vigil.”¹⁰² The bodies of her

95. Solvang, 105.

96. April D. Westbrook, “And He Will Take Your Daughters...”: *Woman Story and the Ethical Evaluation of Monarchy in the David Narrative*, vol. 610, The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 216-217.

97. Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 560.

98. Barron, 182.

99. Exum, 265.

100. Barron, 183.

101. Exum, 263.

102. *Ibid.*, 264.

sons and the sons of her husband's daughter are left out to the elements with no proper burial. Exum observes that this treatment of the Saulides "calls to mind the Philistines' desecration of the bodies of Saul and his sons by hanging them on the wall of Beth-shan (1 Sam. 31)."¹⁰³ While David praised the men of Jabesh-Gilead for showing honor to Saul and burying him, he himself does not make any move to show the same honor to the sons of Saul here. Instead, Rizpah, who several scholars call a Hebrew Antigone,¹⁰⁴ "upholds the right of the dead to burial and [puts] the obligations of familial loyalty (and in her case maternal devotion) as over against the power of the state."¹⁰⁵ Using sackcloth, the trappings of mourning, as a tent to shield herself from the sun,¹⁰⁶ she watches over the corpses over the hot summer months, protecting them against the scavenging birds and wild beasts (2 Sam. 21:10). Her courageous act, driven by her maternal grief, is described laconically, in just one verse, but it achieves an effect of tremendous proportions: "the king is shaken out of his acquiescence in the Gibeonite inhumanity"¹⁰⁷ (2 Sam. 21:10). Rizpah's actions move David to honor the remains of Saul, Jonathan, and the rest of the Saulides by retrieving them and burying them in their family tomb in Benjamin (2 Sam. 21:12-13), which results in God "respond[ing] to the plea for the land" (2 Sam. 21:14).

The killing of the sons of Rizpah the concubine at Gibeah calls to mind another incident involving the Levite's concubine in Gibeah. In the time of the Judges a great outrage was committed against the Levite's concubine at Gibeah. In this instance, the exposing of the dead bodies of Rizpah's sons was a great outrage committed against this "mother in Israel."¹⁰⁸ In the text, both these women are objectified and are completely silent—they are at the mercy of the actions of men and only their actions speak for them. While the actions of the Levite become a grisly means of calling the nation to account for the actions of their brothers at Gibeah towards his concubine, the actions of the concubine Rizpah herself, no less gruesome, call David to account for his action, or rather, inaction. The text might not be explicit in its assignment of blame for the famine on David's rule, but Rizpah's actions bring a clear judgment of David's actions in handing over the sons of Saul to the Gibeonites and allowing their bodies to be desecrated. While Rizpah, the concubine of a deposed royal house, is a woman with no political power, her courageous actions serve as a contrast to the powerful king, and she exemplifies the justice and compassion that is expected of him.¹⁰⁹ Solvang concludes, "It is not until David acts with respect towards his enemies that God changes the conditions of the land, ending the famine. It is the royal woman Rizpah who initiates the cultic acts that bring the return of divine favor and fertility to the land."¹¹⁰

103. Ibid., 263.

104. Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 562; Exum, 261.

105. Exum, 264.

106. Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 561.

107. Ibid., 562.

108. See 2 Sam. 20:19; Westbrook, 219.

109. Westbrook, 220.

110. Solvang, 107.

VI. CONCLUSION

Hannah, Abigail, Bathsheba and Rizpah are four women from different backgrounds, with very different stories. Yet, they have this in common: they are heroines for the historian, even if they are not commonly read as such. Hannah, a woman who suffers in silence, transforms into the mother of the kingmaker. Abigail is a courageous and intelligent household manager who prevents the impending disaster on her house, and in doing so, saves the kingship of the future king. Bathsheba is a beautiful woman who begins as the victim of the king's abuse of power, but in the end, uses her persuasive courtly skills to ensure Solomon's ascension to the throne. Rizpah is a grieving mother who protects the bodies of her sons from being ravaged by animals, her actions spurring the king to right action and thus, averting the famine in the land. At key points of Israel's history, when the rulers of the land failed to act in ways that rightly embodied God's reign, these women stepped up in courageous ways to influence and shape the course of Israelite history.

Readers looking for exemplars of leadership in the Bible often look to well-known characters of great repute, such as the Prophet Samuel or King David, or female figures such as Deborah the Judge and Queen Esther—women who have been accorded official titles in Israelite society. These four women-stories, however, demonstrate that leadership in God's economy extends beyond conventional notions associated with position, title, followership, and great exploits. Godly leadership is measured by obedience to God's covenant and by the extent to which the leader embodies God's righteous, just, and compassionate rule. Just as the success of the king was not evaluated by the power or wealth he amassed, which, in our time can also be translated to the increase of influence and reach, godly leaders must be evaluated by their actions toward those who have been entrusted to their care. The stories of these four women demonstrate that covenantal faithfulness, courage, decisiveness, and diplomacy are not exclusive to the realm of men. While women like Deborah and Esther provide heroic examples of women in leadership roles, we must continue to plow the text to uncover what the lesser-known women in the Hebrew Bible can teach us by bringing their stories out from the margins into the forefront. As Hannah's song indicates, God's story is the story of the Great Reversal, lifting up the poor and needy and seating them at the seat of honor with princes (1 Sam. 2:8).

We must reconsider the ways in which we flatten our reading of women in the Bible. Women who are courageous and assertive are not all power-hungry usurpers; the historian does not pit woman against man in the narrative. Instead, what we might glean from the text is a picture of both men and women, as fellow bearers of the *Imago Dei*,¹¹¹ being used by God to establish his purposes on earth. For further study, a detailed survey of the interconnected male-female relationships in the Old and New Testament narratives will contribute greatly to the discussion of biblical gender mutuality as it relates to leadership in God's economy.

111. See Fr. Francis Martin, "The New Feminism: Biblical Foundations and Some Lines of Development," in *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, ed. Michele M. Schumacher (Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, U.K.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2004), 141–168.

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