Rereading the Samuel Text from the Perspective of an "Internally Persuasive Word"

SuJung Shin

New Brunswick Theological Seminary

Abstract: This paper explores how one can reread biblical literature not as a closed or fixed literature or historiography but as a text continuously open to the audience in the context of a multi-cultural and multi-communicational world. Focusing specifically on the prose of Samuel, this paper's approach to the biblical narrative invites a rereading from the perspective of an internally persuasive word, and thus provides a dialogic way of understanding the interrelations of character, speaker, and audience. In so doing, I attempt to make the stylistic (and ideological) distinction between "authoritative word" and "internally persuasive word." In the authoritative word, one would encounter a single and unitary language containing a monologic ideological thought. In internally persuasive discourse, on the other hand, one discovers various available ideological points of view and values that become contestable in each of the new contexts that dialogize the discourse. Influenced by a new perspective in literary studies, this paper challenges certain traditional values and presuppositions in regard to the text, such as the univocality of meaning, the privileging of the author's intention, and the objective reality of history and aims to provide an opportunity for recognizing a dialogic, rather than monologic, understanding of the biblical text in the context of the twenty-first century, where hierarchical dominance and the authority of logocentrism have been continuously questioned by and in dialogue with ordinary readers.

Introduction

This paper discusses how the Samuel text can be reread as dialogic, rather than straightforwardly monologic, in light of the literary theories of dialogue. In the context of a multi-cultural and multi-communicational world, this paper asks and explores how one can reread biblical literature not as a closed or fixed literature or historiography but as a text continuously open to the audience for the situation of "contemporaneity." This approach to the biblical prose may permit a new reading strategy to better understand the dialogic interrelations of author, character, and reader, and invites a rereading from the perspective of a *non-authoritative but internally dialogized* word of the text.

In so doing, I utilize Bakhtin's theories of dialogue, in continuity and discontinuity with past and present scholarship, to reread the prose of Samuel. Bakhtin's view of dialogic language is helpful in that it refers to a variable (i.e., historical) state of affairs embedded in a (literary) text, and thus grants greater significance to the fact that language is a social and historical phenomenon. This paper demonstrates the significance of the social context of language when considering the relation of text to context.

In illustrating the usefulness of the literary theories of Bakhtin in reading the biblical narrative, this study employs a narrative-critical understanding of the prose that can help one to see how to "continue" and develop an alternative discussion on the narratives of Samuel from the

Bakhtin's perspective on reading artistic prose. Narrative criticism in biblical studies provides us with investigative tools for the relations of author, character, and reader. For example, the roles of the implied author and the narrator, and their relationships to the characters, have been key elements to understanding biblical narrative. Traditionally, however, the author(s) has been generally conceived of in "monologic" terms, especially in terms of the relation of the author to the reader. Rather than depending on the traditional understanding of the author as monologic, rather than reading the Samuel narrative as a monologic text from the point of view that the narrator predominates over other characters, we are now invited to reconceive the interrelations of author, character, and reader through the process of "dialogization."[1]

In this paper, I focus specifically on the long-standing questions of David as a "hero" for Israel's experiment with kingship, examining a Bakhtinian understanding of the hero's relations to the author and the reader. Dealing with the issues related to the complexity of the hero of David in the narrative of Samuel, I ask who is David (i.e., what kind of hero is David). According to the "multi-languagedness" of 1 and 2 Samuel, David is a shepherd in the field and a musician at the royal court; a little boy and a grown-up warrior; a young man who fights to defend Yahweh's honor and fights to promote himself and his ambitions; the anointed of Yahweh and "a man of blood"; the man after Yahweh's own heart and the man who speaks to his own heart; a quasi-Philistine refugee in exile and an Israelite king in return; the saver (savior) of his people and the killer of some of them, including his soldier Uriah (and his son Absalom?); the sinner and the innocent; the virile and the impotent; the crowned and the decrowned; the praised and the ridiculed, etc.

This study examines David's complex interrelationships with supporting characters focusing specifically on the stories of crowning and decrowning (discrowning) of David in 2 Samuel, and investigates how and why the character of David can be represented as the kind of hero who is *not* determined and finalized by monologic authoritative conclusion. From a Bakhtinian perspective of "internally persuasive discourse,"[2] I argue that the character of David does not remain in an isolated and static condition; based on the "internally persuasive discourse" in Samuel, the words and actions on the hero David are *not finite*, but *open* to (re)interpretation especially when considering a context(s) where hierarchical dominance and the authority of the monarchy have been lost. From narrative-critical and post-narrative critical perspectives, this paper ultimately attempts to reveal how the Samuel text can be reread as dialogic, rather than straightforwardly monologic, when it speaks specifically to the questions of the complexity of the character of David, and how the rereading of the Samuel prose as dialogic can affect and shape our understanding of the notion of the "authoritativeness" of the biblical text.

Monologic vs. Dialogic

1. Dialogization, in this study, means the process of dialogue which takes place among the "plurality of consciousnesses" of "highly heterogeneous and incompatible material." See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Dostoevsky's Polyphonic Novel and Its Treatment in Critical Literature," in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 14–17.

2. According to Bakhtin, in internally persuasive discourse, as will be examined in detail in the next section, an utterance(s) becomes contested, disputed, and reaccented, having participated in more than one value system. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 332.

Narrative criticism in biblical studies may be one of the most useful tools in investigating what a Bakhtinian perspective can offer to a rereading of the narrative of Samuel. From the narrative-critical perspective, the roles of the implied author and the narrator, and their relationships to the implied reader, have been key elements to understanding biblical texts. From the point of view of traditional narrative criticism, investigations into the relationship between the implied author and the competent reader can result in a reader-response criticism with the implied reader being suppressed.[3] In developing the concept of the implied author, Wayne Booth famously argued that "the author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find *complete agreement*."[4] In relation to the reader, the implied author is intended to "impose" a story world upon the reader (e.g., the author's point of view).[5] As David M. Gunn points out, "narrative criticism…has tended to be relatively conservative in its methodology, concerned with observing the mechanics or artistry of literary construction…and often still haunted by historical criticism's need to know the author's 'intention' and the text's 'original' readership if it is to speak legitimately of the text's meaning."[6]

Traditionally, in narrative-critical method, the narrator is said to be "immanent" in the text, along the lines of a character who tells the story.[7] From the point of view, the narrator is considered "omniscient" or "reliable": the narrator knows the truth, and always tells the reader accurate knowledge about the characters and events within the story line. For example, Meir Sternberg, in his study of *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, claims that "the Bible always tells the truth in that its narrator is absolutely and straightforwardly reliable."[8]

From the traditional understanding of the narrator as reliable, the text of Samuel is likely to be read as more monologic than dialogic. The Samuel prose can be easily read as a monologic text from the point of view that the narrator predominates over other characters, and provides the reader with *the* point of view of authorial intention. Robert Polzin's prominent study of Samuel emphasizes the role of the author (i.e., the Deuteronomist) and that of the reliable narrator in

---

3. Stephen Moore identifies the problem of Iser's concept of the implied reader, noting that "the undifferentiated, prescriptive side of Iser's implied reader…relegated its individualistic, actual-reader side to the margins." According to Moore, although Iser attempted to present a reading process that "balances text and reader," he ended up presenting the reader "in the firm grip of the text" (Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989], 102).

4. See Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 138 (emphasis mine).

5. Cf. The Bible and Culture Collective, "Reader-Response Criticism," in *The Postmodern Bible,* ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli, Stephen D. Moore, Gary A. Phillips, and Regina M. Schwartz (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 33; The Bible and Culture Collective, "Structuralist and Narratological Criticism," 85.

6. David M. Gunn, "Narrative Criticism," in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 201–2.

7. David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell note that the "narrator is a character who tells the story while other characters enact it… And it is, in fact, the narrator who determines how other points of view emerge" (Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], 53). Cf. Stephen Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge*, 46.

8. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 51; Robert Alter, influenced by Sternberg, says that "the narrators of the biblical stories are of course 'omniscient,' and that theological term transferred to narrative technique has special justification in their case, for the biblical narrator is presumed to know, quite literally, what God knows, as on occasion he may remind us by reporting God's assessments and intentions, or even what He says to Himself." Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 195.

constructing diverse voices with diverse narrative ideologies. When Polzin uses Bakhtin's theories of dialogue in reading the narratives, he posits the Deuteronomistic History (DH) as a monologue, quite distinct from Bakhtin's definition of a true dialogue.[9] Polzin's reading of the Books of Samuel, in specific, and the DH narrative, in general, is heavily influenced by Bakhtin's perspectives on the monologic novel, in which "the author's [the Deuteronomist's, for Polzin] ultimate semantic authority is realized."[10] Even though he does not entirely leave out the possibility of DH's "hidden dialogue" that may reveal competing voices of God,[11] Polzin argues that the word of the narrator is subordinate to the utterance of God, in a way in which the monologic rather than dialogic construction is unveiled.[12] From that viewpoint, the narrator's reliability is dependent upon the "LORD's omnipotence" according to Polzin.[13] Polzin clearly states that he shares this aspect of Sternberg's view on the narrator. That is, Polzin reads DH with the "unifying ideological stance of a work's 'implied author'… found in the words of the narrator or in the words of God found in the narrative."[14]

Polzin's structuralist understanding of the implied author and the narrator in the text of Samuel greatly influences his appropriation of Bakhtin's theories of dialogue in his analyses of the narratives. For Polzin, the ideological voice of the Deuteronomist controls and predominates over the construction of other diverse ideologies in DH. In attempting to read this "ultimate semantic authority" of the author and that of God, Polzin does not entertain the possibility the text of Samuel may be understood as dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense of the term.

In contrast to Polzin's argument, however, I argue that it is possible, even necessary, to open up an alternate Bakhtinian reading of Samuel, reconceiving the roles of and interrelationships among the author, hero, and reader, especially in terms of their dialogic nature: one can reread the text from the perspective of dialogue from which Bakhtin developed his theories on "novelness" and "prosaics."[15] I argue that the dialogic nature of the text becomes

---

9. Robert Polzin states, "Bakhtin summarizes the characteristics of a novel that is basically monologic in structure; his words are equally valid for a work such as the Deuteronomic History." See Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 21.

10. Bakhtin, "Discourse in Dostoevsky," in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 203, quoted by Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 21.

11. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 21–24, writes, "For clearly even a monologue may contain a variety of ideas and viewpoints that may or may not compete with one another with equal weight or authority… Therefore the possibility exists that, whatever may be the obvious monologic composition of the Deuteronomic History taken as a unity, a closer reading of the text may reveal a hidden dialogue between competing voices within the various utterances of God both in themselves and as interpreted by the Deuteronomic narrator."

12. Ibid., 22.

13. Polzin argues for the narrator's omniscient and prophetic qualities through the "very contract between narrator and reader that makes up the Israelite narrative convention." According to Polzin, "this omniscient power, belonging by right of convention and ideology to the Israelite narrator, is very much like a predictive power… Like the Israelite prophet's knowledge, the Israelite narrator's omniscience is always and everywhere constrained by the LORD's omnipotence." See Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History: 1 Samuel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); 96–97.

14. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, 20–21.

15. For this matter, Polzin's remark is helpful: "the Deuteronomist's work is fundamentally novel, that is, without sufficiently obvious literary progenitors." By novel, Polzin means a "real text rather than a hypothesized pre-text." Importantly, Polzin observed DH as providing "the more prosaic mystery of a new kind of narrative," clearly distinct from the texts of epics and myths from the ancient Near East. Here Polzin is, of course, seen as greatly influenced by Bakhtin's definitions and distinctions of the genres between prose and poetry. See Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 148, n. 38.

unmistakably perceptible when the author/narrator yields his/her "ultimate semantic authority" to others, i.e., characters and readers, while he/she participates in the dialogue, in this case, on questions of David's identity and location and that of the Davidic monarchy. From that viewpoint, the Samuel text is then no longer considered the monologic word of the reliable narrator, the author, and, therefore, God. The core of my analysis discusses how the language of Samuel becomes fundamentally dialogic when it speaks to the character of David as a dialogic hero, focusing specifically on the ambivalent act of his crowning and decrowning as described in the narrative of Samuel.

The Authoritative Word vs. an Internally Persuasive Word

One of Polzin's main contributions to the study of the Books of Samuel might be his use of Bakhtin's distinction between "authoritative word" and "internally persuasive word." Bakhtin makes a sharp distinction between "authoritative discourse" and "internally persuasive discourse" as the opposed categories of ideological discourse. According to Bakhtin, the authoritative word represents the authority of "religious, political, moral" discourses and "the word of the father, of adults and of teachers, etc."[16] The authoritative word is "located in a distanced zone…connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past. It is a *prior* discourse… It can be profaned. It is akin to taboo, i.e., a name that must not be taken in vain."[17] On the other hand, internally persuasive discourse is "a contemporary word, born in a zone of contact with unresolved contemporaneity," which enters into "an intense interaction, a *struggle* with other internally persuasive discourses."[18] According to Bakhtin, the semantic structure of an internally persuasive word is "*not finite*, it is *open*; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer *ways to mean*."[19] In the authoritative word, one would encounter a single and unitary language containing a monologic ideological thought. In internally persuasive discourse, on the other hand, one discovers various available ideological points of view and values that become "contestable" in each of the new contexts that dialogize the discourse.

In analyzing this distinction between authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse, Polzin insightfully suggests that the successful integration of the authoritative word with what Bakhtin calls the internally persuasive word might have constituted the significant novelistic feature represented by the Books of Samuel. In Polzin's view, the representation of the Samuel text becomes "profoundly contemporaneous words about the past."[20] Polzin suggests that the Samuel narrative can be viewed as a contemporary word providing complex profundity for its present. In Polzin's view, however, this rich complexity of the internally persuasive word in Samuel does not defeat the authoritative nature of the Deuteronomist throughout the DH. That is, the author/narrator is considered to be the "master" in uniting both categories of discourse—externally authoritative word and internally persuasive word—as deliberate authorial activity.

16. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 342.
17. Ibid. (author's emphasis).
18. Ibid., 346.
19. Ibid. (author's emphasis).
20. Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 148.

While Polzin acknowledges a "contemporary word" on the part of the Deuteronomist, he nevertheless sees the Deuteronomist providing a "final meaning."

However, the question on the reliability of the narrator has been raised by some recent literary studies in reading the narratives of the Hebrew Bible: David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell suggest that the "narrator is less than straightforwardly reliable, perhaps sometimes unsure of the 'facts', and perhaps, too, prone to use conflicting facts and evaluations ironically against the reader, as a device to shake the reader's assurance."[21] This observation on the narrator as "less than straightforwardly reliable" is an important key to understanding the role of the narrator for my rereading of the prose concerning David.

Of importance is the fact that the author/narrator may not have intended to fully control the reader's activity, as Polzin observes. From this new perspective, the ideological omnipotence of the narrator can be challenged, and its influence on the reader's role diminished. The narrator is no longer seen as the "master" of deliberate storytelling, located outside the reader, always giving accurate knowledge or instruction and admonition to the reader. Considering that the Samuel text is open to "contemporaneity," i.e., to the realities of crisis for the generations living in/after a catastrophic event(s),[22] the narrator then loses the assurance of reliability against various available ideological points of view, approaches, directions, and values. The narrator is simply unable to provide the reader with any final word for the situation of contemporaneity. The narrator does not know everything and does not make a final decision for the reader regarding the identity and location of a Davidic hero and the Davidic monarchy particularly in a context(s) of social events of catastrophe and crisis.

A Dialogic Hero: the Crowned/Decrowned David

One could ask, how and why can the character of David be represented as the kind of hero who is not subject to authorial control or determined by monologic conclusion, but remains open to interpretation? Below I will explore, from the perspective of internally persuasive word, how, according to the prose of Samuel, David can be perceived as a dialogic hero in the ambivalent act of his crowning and decrowning.

Bakhtin states that, when appearing as a distanced figure, a hero is an object of seriousness[23]; in a dialogic work, however, the seriousness inherent in hierarchical distance is destroyed, and a hero is brought to the world of open-endedness, indecision, and indeterminacy.[24] A dialogic hero acts and speaks "in a zone of familiar contact with the open-ended present."[25] In other words, the hero is presented not in the seriousness of the absolute and complete past, but in the realm of the present and in immediate contact with living

21. Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 56.
22. In this paper, when I read the Samuel prose as a "real text" (i.e., the present form of the text, whatever its pre-texts) or artful text from a narrative critical perspective, I do not endeavor to trace the history of the text's composition, e.g., via reference to redactional layers. This paper, methodologically speaking, does not attempt to ask the matter of historical issues, although I take seriously the prose's language as a product of particular social settings and historical traditions.
23. Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 23.
24. Cf. ibid., 16.
25. Bakhtin, "Characteristics of Genre and Plot Composition in Dostoevsky's Works," in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 108.

contemporaries.[26]

Bakhtin describes this image of a hero's close contact with living contemporaries as "uncrowning" or "decrowning," which equates to the hero's removal from the "sacred and sacrosanct" plane of the past and the destruction of hierarchical distance.[27] The hero comes into proximity; in light of this image of a hero in proximity, a dialogic reading of Samuel underscores the very human characterization of David in Samuel—his fears, his mistakes, his foibles, etc. The hero's close contact with the reader in Samuel becomes readily apparent when one compares the depiction of David in Samuel with his portrayal in Chronicles. In Chronicles, the reader would not find a hero who comes in close proximity to them; rather, he/she may look up to an idealized and almost perfect figure of David, e.g., the Chronicler's account does not introduce the audience to a David who sins against Bathsheba and Uriah.

In such a "serious" representation of a character, David would remain forever "crowned" and "sacrosanct." That is, in a monologic text, crowning a hero is "single-leveled, absolute, heavy, and monolithically serious."[28] On the other hand, in a dialogic text, crowning is inseparable from decrowning and, therefore, becomes two-leveled and ambivalent. Thus, the crowning and decrowning of David can be perceived as inseparable: David's crowning already includes the idea of his immanent decrowning.[29]

A dialogic reading of 2 Samuel shows how the crowning of David is ambivalent and double-leveled from the very start as David is crowned twice, *before* and *after* civil war between the houses of Saul and David. In 2 Sam 1, David is informed that Saul has died in battle against the Philistines and, in the next chapter, David is crowned by the people of Judah at Hebron (2 Sam 2:4). Yet David's decrowning glimmers immediately in unresolved political tensions: he confronts the rift with the house of Saul and the people of Israel (2 Sam 2:8–11). In 2 Sam 2–4, Joab's brother Asahel is killed by Abner, Saul's army commander (2:23); Abner is killed by Joab, David's army commander (3:27); Ish-bosheth, son of Saul and king of Israel after Saul's death, is killed by Baanah and Rechab, Ish-bosheth's army commanders (4:7); and Baanah and Rechab are killed by David's men (4:12).

David is ultimately crowned again, this time by the elders of Israel in 2 Sam 5:1–3. Through this process, David, indeed, grows stronger, while the house of Saul grows weaker, as the narrator comments in 2 Sam 3:1. Yet although David becomes king over both Judah and Israel, his decrowning always lurks alongside his crowning,[30] which is felt in the unceasing and unresolved tension between the people of Judah and the people of Israel. One could even argue that a decrowning lurks throughout David's entire reign. After Saul dies in battle (in accordance with David's wishful prediction in 1 Sam 26:10), the undying threat from the house of Saul will distress David for most of his reign (cf. 21:12–14).

In fact, as soon as David is anointed by Samuel in 1 Sam 16, "the anointed one" of Judah submits to the house of Saul and becomes Saul's "servant" (1 Sam 16:14ff). But, he ultimately departs from the house of Saul: Saul's jealousy and fears estrange him from the house of Saul (1 Sam 18:9, 12–13). David plays the enemy of (the house of) Saul from that moment forward (cf. 18:29; 19:17). In so doing, David has to convince others (including Saul) of the "invincible" nature of being "the LORD's anointed" and kill those who fail to acknowledge it (especially after

26. Cf. ibid.
27. Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," 23.
28. Bakhtin, "Characteristics of Genre and Plot Composition," 124.
29. Cf. ibid.
30. Cf. ibid., 125.

Saul's death).

The tension-ridden cycle of killing and crowning which foreshadows David's decrowning actually transpires through his son Absalom (2 Sam 15). After Saul's death, the one who "wins away the hearts of the people of Israel" (2 Sam 15:6) is not Ish-bosheth, the king of Israel of two years; nor Abner, Saul's army commander; nor even Mephibosheth, Saul's grandson and the last of Saul's line. Rather, it is Absalom, the third son of David and killer of firstborn Amnon. The prose's description of Absalom's physical attractiveness (14:25) followed by Absalom's actions to "win away the hearts of Israel" in chapter 15 draws the audience's attention to him specifically to highlight his desire for kingship.[31] Michael Avioz argues that Absalom's beauty, especially his growing hair, is intended to "signal Absalom's intentions for kingship to the people, since long hair was related to beauty and was characteristic of kings."[32] This detail reminds the audience of earlier physical descriptions of Saul (1 Sam 9:2), Eliab (1 Sam 16:6–7), David (1 Sam 16:12), and Adonijah (1 Kgs 1:6). Each man, who is a kingly figure or a possible candidate for the role, is described as physically good-looking. Even more significant, both Absalom and Saul are described as *more beautiful* than any other men in Israel (1 Sam 9:2 and 2 Sam 14:25). If beauty is recognized as a trait of kingship in 1 and 2 Samuel,[33] and noting the consonance with Saul, it is highly likely that the mention of Absalom's beauty anticipates his role as a competitor of his father David.

The detail regarding Absalom's beauty is preceded by the story of Tamar and Amnon and the report of Absalom's return to Jerusalem after his murder of Amnon. The audience does not, of course, directly hear from the narrator that kingly ambitions motivated Absalom's murder of Amnon (cf. 13:32). Bar-Efrat claims that "it was family affairs, not political objective which according to the narrator, led to Amnon's murder."[34] However, if the narrator does not tell, or does not know, everything, then the audience is left to suspect that Amnon, the crown prince and the eldest son of David, might have been Absalom's intended target for more than one reason.

After Absalom flees upon Amnon's murder, Joab orchestrates his return to Jerusalem through the mediation of a disguised wise woman of Tekoa (14:1–24). The "widow" presents a fictitious analogue to the case of avenging of royal blood: "Your maidservant had two sons…one of them struck the other and killed him. Then the whole clan confronted your maidservant and said, 'Hand over the one who killed his brother, that we may put him to death for the slaying of his brother'" (vv. 6-7); "You have planned the like" (v. 13).[35] She continues to reveal how her story provides some parallel with the case of the king: "Let your Majesty be mindful of the LORD your God and restrain the blood avenger bent on destruction, so that my son may not be killed" (v. 11); "your Majesty condemns himself in that your Majesty does not bring back his own banished son" (v. 13).

---

31. Michael Avioz argues that Absalom's beauty, especially his growing hair, is intended to "signal Absalom's intentions for kingship to the people, since long hair was related to beauty and was characteristic of kings." See Michael Avioz, "The Motif of Beauty in the Books of Samuel and Kings," *Vetus Testamentum* 59 (2009): 352.
32. Ibid.
33. Avioz notes that Samuel deals with the subject of beauty somewhat extensively, whereas Kings does not describe the beauty of Solomon, Hezekiah, and Josiah, "although such a casting could have contributed to their ideal description" (ibid., 352, 359).
34. Shimon Bar-Efrat, "The Narrative of Amnon and Tamar," in *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 274.
35. All bible quotations are from the Tanakh (TNK) by the Jewish Publication Society (1999), unless otherwise noted.

Following the king's favorable response to her plight, she exposes that "the king"[36] has "devised (חָשַׁב *chashab*) a thing" (v. 13), unlike God who "makes plans (חָשַׁב *chashab*) so that no one may be kept banished" (v. 14). In revealing some tensions between the imminent danger of her son and the banished situation of the king's son, the disguised woman indeed draws upon the controlling images of killing and being killed by one's own family. She overtly uncovers the issue of life and death here: "We all must die; we are like water that is poured out on the ground and cannot be gathered up. [But] God will not take away a life" (v. 14). Claudia V. Camp underscores the nature of the "incisiveness and authority" of her argument by suggesting that this verse reflects an "identificational proverb" that creates an image similar to the one found in Prov. 17:14: "The beginning of strife is like letting out water; so stop before the quarrel breaks out."[37]

Interestingly, the woman of Tekoa likens David to "an angel of Elohim" twice (vv. 17, 20). In the books of Samuel, there are two more instances where David is called an angel of Elohim: the Philistine king Achish says David is as pleasing in his sight as an angel of Elohim (1 Sam 29:9), and Mephibosheth compares David to an angel of Elohim when he claims Ziba slandered him (2 Sam 19:28).[38] In both of these circumstances, David is ostensibly prevented from killing his enemy: Achish, heeding warnings from his commanders, withdraws David from the battle against Israel; similarly, Mephibosheth's story and appearance of mourning cast doubt on Ziba's claim and probably save his life.

In line with these instances where David is called an angel of Elohim, the situation presented by the woman of Tekoa likely also involves David making a life or death decision. The wise woman urges David to make a decision like an angel of Elohim who understands everything, good and bad (v. 17). The image of a "killing" angel in 2 Samuel is significant: when an angel is mentioned again in Ch. 24:16–17, the angel is destroying the people in Jerusalem as punishment for David's census-taking. Revealed as "an angel of Elohim," David the king is certainly trapped by the wise woman in swearing the oath that "as the Lord lives, not a hair of your son shall fall to the ground" (v. 11) and in exercising it provisionally as he has Joab bring Absalom back to Jerusalem (v. 21).

The one ultimately deceived in the prose, however, is not David but his son Absalom. It would take Absalom a few more years to learn that David's recall of his son to Jerusalem did not equate with reconciliation. Based on a misled oath, Absalom's return is conditioned by a ban against seeing his father's face (v. 24). Essentially, Absalom spends two years in Jerusalem as David's "enemy" (v. 28) until he orchestrates a reunion through Joab (vv. 32–33). Although the prose does not tell exactly when Absalom begins to desire the throne, the two years that Absalom hated Amnon (13:23), his three years in exile from the king, and two more years in Jerusalem excluded from the king's palace add up to a substantial period for Absalom to make up his mind to stand against David.

Now, Absalom finally exposes the tension of life and death between him and his father even more clearly: in 2 Sam 14:32, Absalom says, "If there is guilt in me, let him kill me!"[39] Hearing that from Joab, David would kiss Absalom rather than kill him (in v. 33). Interestingly,

---

36. The prose of ch. 14 never mentions the name David.

37. Claudia V. Camp, "The Wise Women of 2 Samuel: A Role Model for Women in Early Israel?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981): 16, 20-21.

38. Jeremy Schipper observes that in texts such as 2 Sam 14:20 and 19:28, one hears "traces of texts involving deception and disloyalty," arguing that David is deceived when called by "the angel of God." Jeremy Schipper, "'Why Do You Still Speak of Your Affairs?': Polyphony in Mephibosheth's Exchanges with David in 2 Samuel," *VT* 54 (2004), 350.

39. The translation is from the NRSV.

from nearly this moment of Absalom's reinstatement (14:33), Absalom "plays" an enemy of David, as one sees in and after 2 Sam 15:1ff. Eventually, Absalom becomes a "stench in his father's nostrils" by following Ahithophel's advice to lie with his father's concubines "before the eyes of all Israel" in Ch. 16:21–22. This incident is, of course, predicted by Yahweh through Nathan after David killed Uriah after taking Bathsheba: in 12:10–11, Yahweh speaks through Nathan, "you spurned me by taking the wife of Uriah the Hittite and making her your wife… I will take your wives and give them to another man before your very eyes and he shall sleep with your wives under this very sun." Thus, Absalom becomes the agent who fulfills Yahweh's retributive words against David.

In filling this role, Absalom culminates the process of decrowning David. David becomes the only king in the Samuel prose, in specific, and the DH narrative, in general, who flees from his own city and kingship, as one reads in 15:14. The people weep for David in v. 23, and the decrowned David weeps, too, and walks barefoot with his head covered in v. 30. The contrast with Saul is noteworthy: it would be fair to say that Saul's kingship finally ends with his death, as is typical of most kings in DH. Saul is never really decrowned by the people in the seventeen chapters in Samuel that tell of a reign that overlaps with David's rise. Rather, Saul always plays a crowned king, even after he is rejected by Samuel and ultimately by Yahweh, until he dies in battle. Saul sustains his kingship with his people to decide to be with Saul and approves his kingship. In his death, Saul is beheaded and his body is dishonored by the Philistines but, once again, Saul's body is retrieved by people who risk their lives to give Saul an appropriate burial at Jabesh (1 Sam 31:9–13).

On the other hand, David is decrowned, in large part, because the people (with Absalom) reject David. At one point, the spirit of Yahweh leaves Saul and comes upon David in 1 Sam 16:13–14. Now, the hearts of the people leave David and veer toward Absalom in 2 Sam 15:6, 13. In the ambivalent act of David's crowning and decrowning, David's own son Absalom becomes his father's enemy and remains so until the son dies by the hands of Joab in 2 Sam 18. Trapped by his "hair" (2 Sam 18:9), that is, his "crowning glory" (2 Sam 14:26), Absalom ends his life as an enemy of David and "completes" Yahweh's retributive words and Nathan's judgment against his father: 2 Sam 12:13-14: "you [David] shall not die. However, since you have spurned the enemies of the LORD by this deed, even the child about to be born to you shall die." David, once again, risks and loses his own child in saving himself and his kingship.

David is ultimately decrowned by Absalom, but, what makes the decrowning of David unique and quite different from the process of Saul's crowning and end of his kingship, is that David may return to Jerusalem to be crowned again in the immediate future. A dialogic perspective on the ambivalent act of crowning and decrowning highlights this facet of the prose. David deliberately plans his return to Jerusalem with his friend Hushai the Arkite in 15:37; 16:16; cf. 16:17. From the moment of his decrowning, David suggests the idea of returning to Jerusalem, and tells Zadok to take the ark back into the city 15:25. What the audience will unfailingly hear is that the hero David himself presents the idea that he may return in the near future, David says in v. 25, "If I find favor with the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see it and its abode." (15:25).

David separates his destiny from that of the ark momentarily in an attempt to send Zadok and Abiathar back to Jerusalem. David risks his life to protect the ark and kingship from being ultimately "decrowned," David continues to say in v. 26, "if he [Yahweh] should say, 'I do not want you,' I am ready" (15:26). David continues by telling Zadok in v. 28, "I shall linger in the steppes of the wilderness until word comes from you to inform me [to return]" (15:28). Clearly,

David "lingers" between the moments of crowning and decrowning. Through this lingering, David, as an image of a dialogic hero, wavers between decrowning and (re)crowning in the loss of a good measure of his authority and of conclusiveness and finality.

At the point of his decrowning, "a new crowning already glimmers."[40] A dialogic hero David is in his return to Jerusalem in 2 Sam 19. However, in typical seriocomic style, David returns to Jerusalem in "profanation," that is, in the midst of "carnivalistic blasphemies" and "bringing the hero to the plane of laughter."[41] In his return, David meets Shimei, whom Abishai recalls as the one who cursed rather than praised "the LORD's anointed" (19:22). David also confronts Mephibosheth, who asserts that Ziba betrayed him and lied to David (19:27–28); in listening to Mephibosheth, David realizes that he is being deceived (and, perhaps, ridiculed) by the one or the other. In his return to Jerusalem, David is also caught between the people of Judah, who claim to be David's "own flesh and blood," and the people of Israel, who insist that they were the first to suggest bringing David back (19:43–44). Moreover, he encounters Sheba, whom he later refers to as the one who "will cause more trouble than Absalom" (20:1–2, 6). Furthermore, when David finally returns to his palace in Jerusalem, he finds his raped concubines, whose presence would continually remind David of his shameful defeat rather than his triumph and victory (20:3). The returned king faces the "ridicule" of others (i.e., both author and audience), who may laugh at the ambivalence of his crowning and decrowning,[42] and ridicule the "profanation" in his return. In a dialogic text, one does not expect "conclusiveness" or "absolute closedness" in the return of the hero.

Conclusion

In the Samuel prose, as a dialogic hero, David is crowned and decrowned; David escapes from Jerusalem and returns to Jerusalem. In his return to Jerusalem without Absalom, David may be praised as a victorious king but abused as a defeated father (cf. 2 Sam 19:1). David the king is ambivalently elevated and degraded; as a returned king, David is drawn into a zone of "familiar and crude contact" with others in the text of "dialogics."

The significant point here is that the dialogic act of a crowning and decrowning hero is perceived as sharply distinct from a "theatrical performance"; from the perspective, the hero does not perform, as though on stage, any act of "heroization."[43] David as a dialogic hero does not show to the audience a performance of any heroic action at a distance, such as the presentation of David's grand vision in Chronicles to build a house of Yahweh in the service of praise and thanksgiving; rather, he exposes himself to risks, dangers, and life crisis, and thus reveals to the audience his trials, goofs, and foibles. The audience may laugh at, moreover laughs with, David's

40. Bakhtin, "Characteristics of Genre and Plot Composition," 125.

41. Bakhtin points out that "profanation" is the significant aspect of the carnival sense of the world: "carnivalistic blasphemies, a whole system of carnivalistic debasings and bringings down to earth, carnivalistic obscenities linked with the reproductive power of the earth and the body, carnivalistic parodies on sacred texts and sayings, etc." (ibid., 123).

42. For example, Bakhtin recalls the "scene of crowning and decrowning the 'King of the Jews' in the canonical Gospels," when he explains a defining influence of the "menippea" and "carnivalization" on ancient Christian literature. He argues that "carnivalization is even more powerfully present in apocryphal Christian literature," although he does not mention the (canonical) texts of the Hebrew Bible (ibid., 135).

43. For Bakhtin's discussion of "epic heroization" and its parodic reworking, see Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 51–68.

ambitions and failures, not entirely unfamiliar with and dissimilar to their own. This understanding illuminates how the audience, in facing the historical events of catastrophe and crisis, may see the serious, monologic treatment of a Davidic hero and Davidic monarchy with a parallel "comic double," such as in the process of crowning and decrowning David in the prose of Samuel.

If a monologic reading of Samuel is walled off from the audience's free contact with the open-endedness of the prose in the world of hierarchical seriousness and determinacy, then a dialogic reading of DH is freely opened to the audience in the situation of contemporaneity. Through a dialogic reading, one can see how the figure of David comes close and is drawn into a zone of "crude and familiar contact" with the contemporaries. Such a representation of a dialogic hero who is both crowned and decrowned functions, in the midst of crisis, to open the life of the hero and that of the audience given the absence and promises of the Davidic kingship, to the search for and creation of communal identity as it always relates to the polemical notion of monarchy.

Especially if the audience lives without the hierarchical structure of kingship in the midst of uncertainty, they may probe questions regarding David and/or a Davidic hero, especially in relation to promises made in Samuel, notably 2 Samuel, about his kingship. Given such a circumstance, questions arise: how would the ordinary people "without rank," that is, without grammar and structure, who are the audience of the prose of Samuel, deal with the destruction of the kingship in the context of exile and after? How would the audience accept, challenge, reclaim and/or reinterpret the authority of the biblical text in times of indeterminacy and uncertainty?

The audience may interpret the crisis of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and the city of David as the destruction of the existing hierarchy and authority. Especially when the Davidic king is not currently ruling, when a Davidic king is always already decrowned in the life of the audience, what is left is for the audience to participate freely and voluntarily in the dialogue—freely expressing its own ideological opinions and decisions, which results in the uneven, unstable, and unending struggle between opposing points of view on the hero and the kingship. The life of the people is on the threshold of a change/transition of kingship that becomes the subject of the ongoing process of "shift-and-renewal" in the life of the audience in the world of open-endedness and indeterminacy.

The end of the Davidic monarchy (in the Deuteronomistic History) could have provided the audience, facing the realities of no kings, with images of both the destruction of hierarchy and of the return of a dialogic hero. The dialogic word of Samuel along with the inconclusive world is continuously open to the immediate and concrete future. In this respect, there exists no straightforwardly monologic word, but only a dialogic word—a double-voiced word[44] on a dialogic hero. A non-authoritative but internally dialogized reading of the text, therefore, liberates from any dogmatic seriousness, from didacticism, from the illusion of the single meaning, the single level, the single monologic truth.

---

44. Bakhtin argues that "for any and every straightforward genre, any and every direct discourse—epic, tragic, lyric, philosophical—may and indeed must itself become the object of representation, the object of a parodic travestying 'mimicry.' It is as if such mimicry rips the word away from its object, disunifies the two, shows that a given straightforward generic word—epic or tragic—is one-sided, bounded, incapable of exhausting the object... Parodic-travestying literature introduces the permanent corrective of laughter, of a critique on the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word, the corrective of reality that is always richer, more fundamental and most importantly *too contradictory and heteroglot* to be fit into a high and straightforward genre." Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," 55 (author's emphasis).