

## 2 SAMUEL



*BERIT OLAM*  
*Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry*

# 2 Samuel

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*Editor*



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*For Bella and Henry Tovey, from whom I learned to distinguish  
an aleph from a beth and much, much more.*



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*And I made a rural pen,  
And I stain'd the water clear*

*Songs of Innocence, Introduction  
William Blake*

## PREFACE

As I embarked on this commentary on 2 Samuel, I assumed that my task was to interpret, or “exegete,” the life of King David for my readers. But the more I tried to interpret him, the more elusive, complex, and distant he became. A king, a father, a warrior, a diplomat, a murderer, a manipulator, a tyrant, a beguiler who is often beguiled, David, as baffling as he is ambiguous, interprets and exposes the fictions of those who meet him. Over the past several years, I have spoken to many people about David, and their ideas are buried in these pages. Rev. Stephen Pisano, SJ, an Old Testament professor here at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, critiqued my shifting deliberations and then took the time to read my final draft and offer suggestions. Rev. Quinn Connors, OCarm, PhD, a clinical psychologist at St. Luke’s Institute in Silver Spring, Maryland, offered insights into my interpretation of 2 Samuel 13: the rape of Tamar. Sharmila Andrews, Rita Mary Cote, and Adrienne Corti also helped me with this section of the commentary. Joan E. Cook, SC, president of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati and Old Testament Book Review Editor for *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, saved me from a couple of inopportune remarks regarding Tamar. Larry and Rita Novakowski read the entire manuscript and made critical observations. Conversations with Federico Giuntoli, an Old Testament professor here at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, have enhanced the final result. I am especially grateful to my sister, Laurie Morrison, a librarian at Brock University in St. Catharines, Canada, to whom I often turned for help in tracking down resources. I also want to thank Richard and Kerry Demers and my own Carmelite brothers, especially the Carmelite communities in Rome; Washington, DC; and Niagara Falls, Canada, for their support and encouragement. Thanks also to Rev. David Cotter who asked me to take on this project several years ago. This commentary also reflects reactions from the students here at the Pontifical Biblical Institute upon whom I first tried out my ideas. Finally, Jerome Walsh, the current editor of this series, has

been an immense support. Insights from his book, *Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), are embedded throughout this volume. He pointed out to me details in the biblical text that I had overlooked and regularly sharpened my prose. I am grateful that he delayed his own retirement to assist me in bringing this volume to publication.

This book is lovingly dedicated to Bella and Henry Tovey. When I began learning Hebrew from Bella some twenty-five years ago at her dining room table, I soon grasped that she and her husband had much to teach me beyond the Hebrew alphabet. I am most grateful to them. As for the foibles in this volume, I claim them as my own, hoping that David, the first real person to be depicted by the written word, and you the reader will excuse them.

## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ABD</i>	<i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
<i>BHS</i>	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>The Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSOTSup</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series</i>
<i>KHAT</i>	<i>Kurzer Handkommentar zum Alten Testament</i>
<i>MT</i>	<i>Masoretic Text</i>
<i>NAB</i>	<i>New American Bible</i>
<i>NIV</i>	<i>New International Version</i>
<i>NJB</i>	<i>New Jerusalem Bible</i>
<i>NJPS</i>	<i>New Jewish Publication Society Version</i>
<i>NRSV</i>	<i>New Revised Standard Version</i>
<i>REB</i>	<i>Revised English Bible</i>
<i>TLOT</i>	<i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by E. Jenni with assistance from C. Westermann. Translated by M. E. Biddle. 3 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997.
<i>ThWAT</i>	<i>Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament</i> . Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1970–.
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>

The English text of the Bible is taken from the *NRSV* unless otherwise noted. In instances where a Hebrew word is cited and the Masoretic Text and *NRSV* have different verse numbers, the *NRSV*'s versification is given, then the Masoretic number is noted in parentheses. For other ancient texts, if no source is given for the English translation, then the translation

is mine. All citations from the works of William Shakespeare are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare* (edited by Stephen Greenblatt; New York and London: Norton, 1997). Citations of 2 Samuel are sometimes given without noting the biblical book, whereas citations from other biblical books always include the book reference.

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

*For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,  
Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,  
Turning the accomplishment of many years  
Into an hour-glass: for the which supply,  
Admit me Chorus to this history;  
Who prologue-like your humble patience pray,  
Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play.*

King Henry V, *Prologue*

Shakespeare greeted the audience awaiting his *King Henry V* with a chorus that reminded them of their role in the events about to unfold on stage. They should deck the kings of England and France with their thoughts and compress a king's reign into an hour-glass so that history might "jump o'er times." The biblical narrator could have introduced the history of King David to his audience with a similar prologue. This ancient history, appearing not on a stage but on the printed page, makes demands on our imagination beyond that of *King Henry V*. We must bedeck our hero David with his sling and five smooth stones as he approaches the Philistine champion, Goliath. We must ascend with him onto the palace terrace in the late afternoon as he peers at the wife of Uriah and trail after him as he climbs the city gate wailing for his dead son. Just as King Henry V's reign, in the bard's hands, is compressed into an hour-glass, so King David's reign, in the narrator's hands, is compressed into forty-two biblical chapters. We hold the narrator's art in our hands, *gently to read, kindly to judge* his tale.

The Second Book of Samuel, by its very title, suggests that it is a sequel. But unlike a modern sequel, 2 Samuel was not separated from 1 Samuel for literary reasons. David's history spills over the borders of

2 Samuel to include his anointing and flight from King Saul in 1 Samuel 16–31 and his withdrawal from public life and eventual death in 1 Kings 1–2. While Saul’s death at the end of 1 Samuel seems like a logical break, even this event spans the two books, illustrating just how entwined 1 and 2 Samuel are. Similarly, even though 2 Samuel 23:1 announces David’s final words, his final discourses continue into 1 Kings 2:1–10, thus joining the closing episodes in 2 Samuel to the opening scenes in 1 Kings. This commentary on 2 Samuel, notwithstanding its literary focus, observes the ancient, unliterary divisions of these biblical books. It is the nature of historical writing to resist literary divisions, a problem that Shakespeare confronted in his history plays. Both *King Henry V* and 2 Samuel begin and end *in medias res*. Our narrator references events that preceded David’s reign<sup>1</sup> and foreshadows events that follow it, including the eventual destruction of Jerusalem in 2 Kings 25.<sup>2</sup> Though this catastrophic ending is attenuated by King Jehoiachin’s transfer from prison to the Babylonian king’s table (2 Kgs 25:27–30), our narrator’s story ends with Israel’s fortunes lying in the rubble of David’s city. Within this arc of Israelite history the narrator tells the story of David.

### 1.1 A Portrait of David and His Reign

Historical narrative, because it shapes and organizes time, offers only a selection of events that have occurred in real time. Since David’s life-story takes little more than a few hours to read, we can assume that it captures only a small portion of his exploits during his forty-year reign. It is not a royal chronicle of the Davidic court but rather a carefully crafted story, a series of episodes woven together to create a novelized portrait of David and his reign. Seemingly insignificant details are included in this portrait, such as in the buildup to Tamar’s rape. We watch her take dough, knead it, bake cakes, and set them before her brother Amnon (2 Sam 13:8–9). Later, we listen to a lengthy conversation between a bogus widow and a beguiled king (14:4–20) that lays the groundwork for Absalom’s return to court. Why are such minutiae included? A chronicler would have reported the rape of Tamar or Absalom’s rehabilitation with a stroke of the pen, eliminating these ostensibly insignificant particulars.

<sup>1</sup> When Nathan (his oracle in 2 Sam 7:6) and David (his prayer in 7:23) reprise Israelite history, they begin with the Exodus from Egypt. When Joab sends news of Uriah’s death to David, he references the death of Abimelech (11:21) from the book of Judges (Judg 9:53).

<sup>2</sup> See 2 Samuel 24.

But our task is to discover how they contribute to the portrait of David because our narrator does not write with the broad strokes of a chronicler. He recounts his episodes in miniature. He creates a masterpiece.

The classics of historical literature are more than just chronicles. Shakespeare's *King Henry IV, Part 1* shifts between the political debates at court to the shenanigans at a tavern in Eastcheap. Geopolitical affairs fade into the shadows when King Henry bids his court to depart so that he might converse with the Prince of Wales alone. King Henry, now more father than king, expresses his disappointment with his son's behavior ("yet let me wonder, Harry, / At thy affections" [act 3, sc. 2, lines 29–30]), and we are allowed a glimpse into the heart of a king. King David must crush a son's rebellion and retake his capital city. But his final orders to his generals come from a father, not a king (18:5: "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom"), and we gain a glimpse into David's heart. And at the end of his life, King Henry orders his courtiers from his deathbed so that he might converse with "Harry" for the last time (*King Henry IV, Part 2*, act 4, sc. 5). The father very nearly accuses the son of usurping the throne, but when he perceives his son's grief, he calls him to his bedside for his "very latest counsel." (Did Shakespeare have the biblical David in mind when he created this scene?) David from his sickbed contends with a usurping son (1 Kgs 1:5–53) and then, just before he dies, he too bestows on his successor, Solomon, his "very latest counsel." As in *King Henry IV, Part 1* and *Part 2*, so in 2 Samuel, the father-son relationship that pervades these "histories" reminds us that there is more at stake in these marvels of historical literature than the chronicling of the geopolitical events of the day.

## 1.2 The Narrative Approach and Source Criticism

Biblical interpretation includes a symphony of approaches and methods, such as textual criticism and the historical-critical method, and this commentary appeals to each of them in order to understand the David Narrative (1 Sam 16 to 1 Kgs 2), but particular attention is given to the narrative approach. A narrative reading observes how a particular biblical story, such as the Abraham Cycle or, in this case, the David Narrative, can be read as a coherent unity. Source criticism and redaction criticism identify the various sources and strata behind the final form of a particular biblical text along with the various levels of redaction (such as, for example, the Deuteronomistic redactions). These approaches uncover the seams (the hands of various authors and editors) in the narrative by observing repetitions and contradictions in the

storyline. At first glance, the two methods seem to be at odds with one another. But, in fact, the narrative approach complements the efforts of source critics. For example, from a source-critical point of view, there seem to be two accounts of David sparing Saul's life (1 Sam 24 and 26). Source critics do well to distinguish the earlier account from the later one, though scholarly opinions are divided on the question: some believe that 1 Samuel 24 is older, while others argue for 1 Samuel 26. But most agree that the same event is recounted twice and that a comparison of the two accounts offers insight into the development of the biblical text. The narrative approach observes how these two accounts can be fruitfully read as elements of a unified narrative. What is the effect of preserving both? Perhaps the second account, repetitive as it is, serves to convince us of David's loyalty to Saul. Since David spares Saul's life on *two* occasions, he is no usurper and should not be accused of complicity in Saul's eventual demise, despite what Shimei son of Gera says later in 2 Samuel 16:5-13. The narrative approach observes how the narrator's art has given thematic cohesion to disparate elements of the story.

Sometimes information given in one part of the narrative is incompatible with a later account. In 7:1 we learn that God has given David rest from his enemies. But in 1 Kings 5:3 Solomon tells King Hiram that David could not build the Temple because God had not yet put his enemies under his feet. The apparent contradiction between these two verses suggests different sources. But from a narrative perspective, 1 Kings 5:3 acknowledges that even if in 2 Samuel 7:1 David enjoyed God-given "rest from all his enemies" after he transferred the ark to Jerusalem (6:1-23), that "rest" was temporary since he returns to the battlefield in the very next chapter (8:1). Such inconsistencies are not unique to the Bible. The narrator in *Pride and Prejudice* (Jane Austen, 1813) allows Mrs. Reynolds, the housekeeper at Pemberley, to describe Mr. Darcy as "the sweetest-tempered, most generous-hearted boy in the world." But near the end of the novel Mr. Darcy's recollection of his childhood to Lizzy contradicts Mrs. Reynolds' memory: "I was spoilt by my parents, who . . . allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing; to care for none beyond my own family circle; to think meanly of all the rest of the world." The reader expects some comment from Lizzy or the narrator on these two irreconcilable descriptions but both are silent. Two thousand years from now, will critics suppose that there are two sources behind Austen's masterpiece? Or can these contradictory recollections be shown to serve the narrator's purpose?

The seams that source critics identify in the David Narrative do not so overwhelm the storyline that it decomposes into a mere collection of isolated episodes (see the discussion of the theme below). Even its subplots help to bind the narrative into an organic whole. Mephibosheth, Jona-

than's son, is mentioned in an aside in 4:4: learning of Abner's murder, his nurse picked him up to flee, but he fell and was left crippled. He reappears in 9:1-13 when David asks if there are any of Saul's descendants to whom he can express his loyalty "for Jonathan's sake" (9:1). David's question reaches back to the beginning of the David Narrative, to the agreement between Jonathan and David (1 Sam 18:3) that developed into an oath that David would protect Jonathan's descendants (1 Sam 20:15, 42). Mephibosheth comes back on stage during Absalom's rebellion to reaffirm his loyalty to David (2 Sam 19:24-30). He is mentioned for the final time near the end of the narrative when David spares his life and the narrator reminds us of David's oath to Jonathan (21:7). That interjection reaches back to the covenant between David and Jonathan at the beginning of David's public life. Thus, the Mephibosheth subplot, running almost the entire length of the David Narrative, contributes to the cohesion of the story.

Admittedly, some "seams" in the story are more difficult for the narrator to compel us to cross. Saul contacts David's father, Jesse, to ensure that David remains at court (1 Sam 16:22), but, when David defeats Goliath, Saul asks his chief general who David's father is (1 Sam 17:55). How could Saul not know the answer to his question? And who killed Goliath? Was it David (1 Sam 17:51) or Elhanan (2 Sam 21:19)? While such inconsistencies witness to the various sources behind the David Narrative, our narrator does not seem concerned that they mar his reasonably coherent portrait of David's reign.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.3 The Theme of the David Narrative (1 Sam 16–1 Kgs 2)

Many scholars have argued that the David Narrative was composed from various sources such as the "History of David's Rise" (1 Sam 16–2 Sam 5), the "Succession Narrative" (2 Sam 9–20 and 1 Kgs 1–2), an "Appendix" (2 Sam 21–24), and other isolated pieces, though they disagree as to the exact parameters of each of these hypothetical sources. How has the narrator brought these once-separate documents together into a coherent story? Evidence of his art lies in two of David's speeches that introduce and reprise the central theme of the David Narrative. The first speech comes when David, standing before an incredulous Saul, claims that God will rescue him from Goliath (1 Sam 17:34-37a). The

<sup>3</sup> There are also inconsistencies within the chapters that critics argue come from the same source. In the so-called succession narrative, Absalom dies without a son to carry on his name (18:18) despite the notice in 14:27 that Absalom had three sons.

second speech comes near the end of his public life (2 Sam 22) in which he praises God who always rescued him. These two speeches function as a literary inclusion to David's public life and lend cohesion to the episodes that lie in between.

### 1.3.1 David's Opening Speech (1 Sam 17:34-37a)

In 1 Samuel 16:1-13 David is introduced into the narrative of Israelite history and is immediately anointed king. But in this scene the new king never utters a word. Summoned from his father's flocks to stand before Samuel, how did David react to the chiasm-bearing Samuel? The narrator offers no comment and does not allow David to speak. In the subsequent machinations that result in his transfer to Saul's court, our hero is still voiceless. This delay builds our anticipation for David's opening speech, which occurs when he presents himself to Saul:<sup>4</sup>

But David answered Saul, "Your servant was a shepherd for his father's flocks. Whenever a lion or bear would come and carry off a lamb from the flock, I would go out after it, strike it and deliver [*nšl*] the lamb from its mouth. If it rose against me, I would grab it by the beard, strike it down and kill it.

#### *Conclusion*

"Your servant struck both lions and bears. So this Philistine, this uncircumcised, will be like one of them because he has reproached the ranks of the living God."

#### *Second Conclusion*

Then David said, "The LORD who delivered [*nšl*] me from the power of the lion and from the power of the bear will deliver [*nšl*] me from the power of this Philistine." (1 Sam 17:34-37a; translation mine)

The youthful David needs to convince King Saul of his skills as a warrior. He sets out his premise: he rescued sheep from pilfering lions and bears. Therefore he can vanquish Goliath. This argument would seem to be sufficient. But then he adjoins a second conclusion that develops the significance of the verb "to deliver" (*nšl*) in his premise. When David delivered the sheep from the lion and bear, *it was God who delivered David!* These are David's opening lines on stage. Hamlet's first line, "A little more than kin and less than kind" (act 1, sc. 2, line 65), is written with a

<sup>4</sup> David's first utterances come when he asks about the reward for dispatching the Philistine (1 Sam 17:26) and in response to his older brother's accusation (1 Sam 17:29).

polyvalent pithiness that sums up the tragedy that follows. David's opening speech, in particular the second conclusion, has the same function: what follows is a story about divine deliverance, or more specifically, the story of how God delivered David.

### 1.3.2 *David's Speech in 2 Samuel 22*

As his public life is drawing to a close, David sings a song that reprises this theme of deliverance. The verb "to deliver" (*nšl*), which appeared three times in David's opening speech before Saul, appears the same number of times in 2 Samuel 22. The incipit, or superscription in 2 Samuel 22:1, offers a rereading of this song into the context of the David Narrative:

David spoke to the LORD the words of this song on the day when the LORD delivered [*nšl*] him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul.

This superscription conditions our interpretation of the song that follows: it is about God rescuing David, and so we spontaneously apply the song's deliverance motifs to events in David's life (for a more detailed study of these motifs, see the discussion of 2 Sam 22 below, pp. 289–96), while we recall his opening speech before Saul. At the beginning of his public life David announced that God would deliver him. Now as his public life draws to a close, David sings that God has done just that.

The programmatic verb in these two speeches, "to deliver" (*nšl*), appears several times in the David Narrative. David, having safely absconded with Saul's spear, addresses Saul and prays that God might protect him (1 Sam 26:24): "May he [the LORD] rescue [*nšl*] me from all tribulation." After Nathan beguiles David with the parable of the poor man's lamb, he reminds David of what God has done for him (2 Sam 12:7): "Then Nathan said to David, 'You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel. I anointed you king over Israel and I rescued [*nšl*] you from the hand of Saul.'" Nathan's oracle focuses our attention on two aspects of God's role in David's life: God anointed and rescued him. Nathan reminds David (and us) that his opening speech before Saul is gradually being realized. The last time the verb "to deliver" (*nšl*) appears in the narrative is in David's Song when at last we grasp the full significance of David's opening lines.

But it is not only the explicit use of the verb "to deliver" that illustrates the centrality of this theme in the narrative. Between David's opening speech and his song in 2 Samuel 22 the reader observes a series

of divine rescues that characterize the David Narrative. Early in the story, the narrator comments that God guarantees David's victories (1 Sam 18:14 and 30:8). Through God's advice David defeats the Philistines (1 Sam 23:1-5) and eludes Saul's clutches (1 Sam 23:10-11). After David takes Jerusalem, there is a series of battles with the Philistines in which God even charts David's battle strategy (2 Sam 5:17-21, 22-25). David renames the battlefield where he defeated the Philistines Baal-perazim, explaining, "The LORD has burst forth against my enemies before me" (5:20). And if we forget God's role, the narrator's interjections remind us of it (8:6, 14): "The LORD gave victory to David everywhere he went." When Rechab and Baanah think that they have saved David from the threat of Ishbaal (4:8), the king, as he pronounces their death sentence, informs them that it is God who saves him (4:9).

At a critical moment in the narrative, divine rescue comes to David without which he would have lost his life. While fleeing from his son Absalom, he learns that a key member of his court, Ahithophel, has betrayed him. In this, his darkest hour, he implores God for help (15:31): "O LORD, I pray you, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness." Two chapters later, God, in his first appearance since the Bathsheba affair, effects David's prayer:

Absalom and all the men of Israel said, "The counsel of Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel." For the LORD had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the LORD might bring ruin on Absalom. (17:14)

The narrator observes that Ahithophel's advice was better than Hushai's. Thus, had Absalom followed it he would have been victorious and reigned in his father's place. But God intervenes, and David is rescued from Absalom's designs.

Complementing this theme of divine rescue is the fact that David's own missteps contribute to this crisis in his reign. David is, as Leonard Cohen sings, "a baffled king composing hallelujah."<sup>5</sup> He is "the first human being in world literature": "He grows, he learns, he travails, he triumphs, and he suffers immeasurable tragedy and loss."<sup>6</sup> To this characterization of David I would add shrewd and gullible. On one hand, David is often a shrewd leader: he dodges Saul's murderous designs (1 Sam 20) and evades Achish's interrogatives (1 Sam 27:10-11). On the other hand, he allows Amnon access to Tamar (2 Sam 13:6-7) and then fails to punish

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Cohen, *Hallelujah*.

<sup>6</sup> Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 6.

him (13:21). He believes Absalom's request that Amnon attend his phony sheep-shearing party (13:26) and is duped by the pretending Tekoite widow (14:1-20), who even succeeds in making him swear an oath—a scene that verges on comic relief. But his most egregious misjudgment comes when he accepts the legitimacy of Absalom's request to journey to Hebron to sacrifice (15:9). That calamitous decision allows his rebel son to muster the forces of insurrection. But for God's rescue, the divine thwarting of Ahithophel's advice, David would not have survived. Thus, David's opening speech before an incredulous Saul foreshadows the story that lies ahead: God will rescue him from Goliath and much more, and before he exits the public stage, he will sing about how God rescued him his life long. This theme of divine deliverance binds these episodes from David's life into a coherent narrative.

## 1.4 A Narrative Approach to Reading the Bible

### 1.4.1 *The Art of Hebrew Narrative*

Hebrew narrative, like English narrative, distinguishes events in the foreground from those in the background. My purpose here is not to present a grammar of Hebrew narrative but to focus briefly on how Hebrew signals background information. In general, foregrounded information is presented in clauses that begin with the Hebrew verb form *wayyiqtol*. Background information (flashbacks or the report of events concurrent to the action in the foreground) is introduced by interrupting this series of *wayyiqtol* clauses with verbless clauses (including clauses such as *wəqātēl* or *wə X qātēl*, where "X" represents the subject) or finite verb clauses, such as *wə X qātal*. For readers of Hebrew, such a shift in the clause structure alerts them to background information. For English readers this shift can go unnoticed and so the background information that is often critical for interpreting events in the foreground is overlooked. For example, as the foreground action moves toward Joab's murder of Abner, the Hebrew text at the end of 3:26 interrupts the series of *wayyiqtol* clauses with a *wə X qātēl* clause: "but David did not know about it [Joab's plot]." The narrator intrudes into the foreground action with a background comment that guides our interpretation of this event: David was completely unaware of Joab's scheme to eliminate Abner. Though David might benefit from Abner's murder (see the commentary), this background clause informs us that he had nothing to do with it. Examples of this feature of Hebrew narrative abound and will be brought to the attention of the reader.

## 1.4.2 The Narrator

When we read the Bible we can imagine that the “author” is speaking directly to us through his or her composition. But it is the narrator who relates the story. The biblical narrator is a sort of external consciousness, “a second self,”<sup>7</sup> created by the author and endowed with superhuman powers. Thus, when David walks alone on the roof and spies the beautiful Bathsheba, the narrator is with him (and therefore so are we). The biblical narrator can tell us if someone is lying (1 Kgs 13:18), give reports from opposing camps in a battle (2 Sam 2:24-32), and even relate God’s state of mind (11:27). The distance between author and narrator is more easily observed in a work such as Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* in which Brontë creates the narrator Mr. Lockwood who then cedes his narrator role to Nelly Dean. But Emily Brontë is neither Mr. Lockwood nor Nelly Dean. They are her creations. Mr. Lockwood is similar to our biblical narrator in that he knows the entire story before he begins to tell it. But because he is dramatized in the story, he is quite different. He is also not very perceptive, describing Heathcliff as “a capital fellow” after their first encounter and for this reason literary critics consider him an “unreliable narrator.” Unlike Mr. Lockwood, our biblical narrator gives us no reason to consider him less than reliable.

But labels like “reliable” or “omniscient” fail to capture the complexity of the biblical narrator’s art. He knows all but does not tell all, doling out information as he sees fit so as to keep us on edge. For example, after Joab kills Abner, David declares himself innocent of Abner’s blood (3:28-29). But we have to wait until the deathbed scene (1 Kgs 2:5) to learn that, in David’s judgment, Joab’s crime had to do with avenging wartime blood in peacetime. That information would have been helpful in 2 Samuel 3. Moreover, by announcing twice (3:27, 30) that Joab killed Abner to revenge the death of Asahel his brother, the narrator appears obtuse, failing to recognize that Joab may also have wanted Abner (and later Amasa) dead in order to preserve his position as David’s chief military officer.<sup>8</sup>

The narrator can also remain silent on questions that seem critical to the outcome of the story, leaving us baffled. Ishbaal accuses Abner of having sex with Saul’s concubine Rizpah (3:7). Did Abner do it? Was

<sup>7</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 71.

<sup>8</sup> See the discussion of the “obtuse narrator” in David M. Bevington, “The Obtuse Narrator in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*,” *Speculum* 36 (1961): 288–98. Bevington describes how the narrator in Chaucer’s poem has only a weak grasp or a superficial understanding of the event he recounts.

Abner planning to usurp Ishbaal's succession to his father's throne? The question is hardly inconsequential. But we never find out. As David flees Jerusalem, Ziba tells David that Mephibosheth has betrayed him (16:3). But as David returns to Jerusalem, Mephibosheth declares his innocence (19:26-27). Was Mephibosheth a traitor? We would like to know for sure, but the narrator does not pronounce on the question. Throughout *Wuthering Heights* the reader cannot help but wonder what in the world led Mr. Earnshaw to introduce Heathcliff into his family. But neither Mr. Lockwood nor Nelly Dean speculates on an answer to what seems to me a most baffling question. Both ancient and modern narrators can leave their readers bewildered.

On other occasions the biblical narrator refers to information that was never provided. Because of the deceased Nahash's loyalty, David sends emissaries to his son Hanun at the time of his succession and his father's death (10:2). But the narrator offers no background information on the political alliance between Nahash and David. Similarly, when Adonijah declares himself David's rightful successor, Bathsheba comes to David complaining, "My lord, you swore to your servant by the LORD your God, saying: Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king" (1 Kgs 1:17). When did David make such a promise? When neither David nor the narrator objects, we infer (perhaps mistakenly) that Bathsheba's reminder is accurate. As Erich Auerbach famously noted, the biblical narration "remains mysterious and 'fraught with background.'"<sup>9</sup>

The narrative approach attends not only to what the narrator says but also to how he says it—the drama of the telling. This requires an acute eye on the text itself to observe its structure and to detect the narrator's strategies.<sup>10</sup> What is the speed at which the narrator tells the story (real time versus narrative time)? He can report David's battles with lightning speed (2 Sam 8:1-8), but he brings Tamar into Amnon's web ever so slowly (13:8-11). The narrator controls our point of view as well. As we watch David leading the ark into Jerusalem, suddenly the narrator has us look up at Michal gazing out the window at her dancing husband (6:16). The narrator can also guide our judgment of events. In 2 Kings 17, after reporting the fall of Samaria in two verses (2 Kgs 17:5-6), the narrator shapes our interpretation of this defeat for the next seventeen verses (2 Kgs 17:7-23: "This occurred because").

<sup>9</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 12.

<sup>10</sup> According to Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, "Style and structure are the essence of a book; great ideas are hogwash" (John Updike, introduction to *Vladimir Nabokov: Lectures on Literature* [San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt, 1980], xxiii).

Finally, readers can raise issues that are outside the narrator's horizon. Saul is sent to exterminate the Amalekites, including women and children (1 Sam 15:3). The order is horrific and modern readers do well to question this and other violent acts in the Bible. But this question is not within the narrator's purview. The narrator does not explain why God condemns to death the son born to David and Bathsheba after their adulterous affair (2 Sam 12:14), casting the punishment for their sin on the next generation, and he remains silent when seven of Saul's descendants are impaled to atone for Saul's sins (21:9). When Absalom has sexual relations with David's concubines (16:22), the narrator says nothing about what a modern reader might consider rape. Absalom's counsel to Tamar to remain silent about her rape is scandalous to modern ears (13:20) and rightly so. Some might even wonder whether David should not have developed his autocratic rule into a constitutional monarchy in order to favor the growth of democracy in ancient Israel. These sorts of questions arise when we read literature from another age and culture. In the *Odyssey*, the bard has no problem with the fact that Penelope is expected to be faithful to her long-absent husband while Odysseus is not held to the same standard. Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (Knopf, 2005) does well to probe that inconsistency for today's audience. When the ancient narrator ignores our questions we sense the distance between our world and the world of the narrator.

### 1.4.3 *The Characters in the David Narrative*

Commenting on the characters in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1*, Harold Bloom writes, "Falstaff is a person, while Hal and Hotspur are fictions."<sup>11</sup> This provocative observation turns the historical Prince Hal and Sir Henry Percy into fictions while Falstaff, mostly an invention of the bard, becomes a real person. But the invented Falstaff is real because he unmasks the fictions through which the historical figures in the play, such as Hal, Hotspur, and even King Henry, live. Bloom's statement reminds us that historical personages, whether they appear in *Henry IV, Part 1* or in the David Narrative, are in the narrator's (or the bard's) hands. Was Bathsheba a real person? Of course she was. But in 2 Samuel the narrator denies us access to a complex view of her. Did she love Uriah? Did she know that David had him killed? Did she desire the advantages of a royal liaison? Because the narrator is not interested in

<sup>11</sup> Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human Mind* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 282.

presenting her as a complex character, we do not learn the answers to these pressing questions, and thus in 2 Samuel 11–12 Bathsheba remains largely undeveloped.

## DAVID

While all the characters in the David Narrative were multifaceted people in real life, the narrator grants that status to David alone. David is a complex, unfolding, and inconclusive character who, on occasion, steps outside his expected role and acts unpredictably. He is a bold experiment in the exploration of the human person despite the limits and frustrations of the narrator's only medium, the written word. In the midst of the official rites of mourning for King Saul and his son Jonathan, the narrator allows us to observe David as he abandons his official function as chief mourner to express his personal affection for Jonathan (1:26). For an instant we are granted a privileged entry into David's inner experience as we gaze into the depths of his grief over the loss of his friend and ally. He steps outside his role as king when, with a father's broken heart, he wails for his rebel son (18:33). This brief, intimately personal moment is abruptly interrupted by David's commander, Joab (19:5-8), who orders him back into his role as king ("So go out at once and speak kindly to your servants" [19:7]). The father obeys and becomes a king again, but it's too late. We know too much. The narrator's art has made visible his divided heart, his inner conflict: a king who should celebrate the execution of a rebel is really a father mourning his dead son.

The narrator investigates the nature of the human person through contradictions and questions that emerge from David's character. Each of David's notable qualities immediately conjures evidence to the contrary. David trusts in God's fidelity (1 Sam 17:37) yet plots the murder of his mistress's husband (2 Sam 11:14-15). This politically shrewd leader, who ensures that his alliance with the remnants of Saul's government survives the murders of Abner, Saul's general (3:27), and Ishbaal, Saul's son (4:9-12), is easily duped by a Tekoite widow (14:1-17) and beguiled by his son's request to travel to Hebron (15:7). He acknowledges Joab's power (3:39) and would like to get rid of him (his one attempt in 19:13 fails), but he also uses him to eliminate Uriah. Is David faithful to his covenant with Jonathan when he brings Mephibosheth to court (9:1-13) or is he placing a claimant to the throne under house arrest, or both? David's inconsistencies, contradictions, and moments of shameless transparency allow us, modern readers, to reclaim our own experience. We meet our own half truths, duplicities, fictions, and moral ambiguities in David more than in any other character in the David Narrative and perhaps in the entire Hebrew Bible.

We might be tempted to decode the interrogative that David's complex character poses, but Hamlet's angry counsel to his false friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern bids us beware:

You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass: and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ; yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, yet you cannot play upon me. (act 3, sc. 2, lines 335–41)

David, like Hamlet, will not be "played." Why did he send Tamar to Amnon? Why did he allow Absalom back at court? And why did he not get rid of Joab during his reign? To demand precise answers to all these questions would be to pluck out David's mystery and play him like a pipe, even if those few glimpses we receive into the king's heart tempt us to do so.

## JOAB

Joab, David's chief military officer, is the only other major character in the narrative, though he does not rise to the level of David's complexity or transparency. Predictably cruel, calculating, and ready to eliminate any threat to his power, he is neither unfolding nor mysterious. We are not surprised when he murders the defenseless Absalom despite the king's direct order (18:5). This act of defiance reveals the tense balance of power between king and general in the world of the David Narrative. Today's democratic governments in which civil leaders command the military are not a helpful paradigm for understanding the relationship between David and his general Joab.

Abner, Saul's general, seats Ishbaal, Saul's son, on the throne (2:9). The general is the kingmaker! So when Ishbaal accuses Abner of treason,<sup>12</sup> the general pushes the king off the throne (3:9). Like Abner, Joab can order David about and can reject royal decisions. After Joab interrupts his attack on Rabbah at the king's bidding, in order to eliminate Uriah (11:17), he commands the king to the battlefield, threatening treason

<sup>12</sup> Ishbaal thinks that Abner has had sexual relations with Rizpah, Saul's concubine (3:7).

(12:27-28) if the king does not obey. When David establishes an alliance with Abner (3:13), Joab enters the court and demands an explanation from the king (3:24)—not what we might expect from a general. Later on Joab defies David when he murders Amasa (20:10), whom David had appointed as Joab's replacement (19:13). By giving Amasa, the rebel general, a place in his court, David signaled to Absalom's rebels that they would be included in his government, a clever political maneuver. But Joab flouts David's strategy and contributes to the further instability of David's rule at a very precarious time. When Joab returns to David's court, the king is unable to confront his general regarding this willful act of insubordination. Thus, David's earlier claim that he is powerless before Joab (3:39) has merit. Joab is not a kingmaker like Abner, but his power at court is considerable.

Joab's ruthlessness is revealed in an exchange he has with one of his soldiers who has seen Absalom trapped in a tree. When Joab asks why he did not kill Absalom, the soldier retorts, "Had I killed Absalom, you would have let me take the fall for it alone" (a free translation of 18:13). He openly accuses his superior officer of duplicity. When the rebel Sheba son of Bichri takes refuge in Abel of Beth-maacah, Joab besieges the town until one of its wise citizens challenges his violent conduct: "why will you swallow up the heritage of the LORD?" (20:19). That wise woman, not King David, is the first person in the David Narrative to confront Joab's brutality. Finally, Joab is an opportunist and so, near the end of his life, when he sides with Adonijah and his cohorts (1 Kgs 1:7), we assume that he considered Adonijah's chances of succeeding to David's throne to be optimal. At one point Joab surprises us when he impedes the king's order for a census, taking the high ground and piously pleading with David to reconsider ("May the LORD your God" [2 Sam 24:3]). But apart from this moment, David's general is usually predictable.

The literary term "foil" derives from the "thin sheet of bright metal placed under a jewel to enhance its brilliance."<sup>13</sup> David's leadership, despite his errors in judgment, shines more like a jewel when Joab, the other major character in this story, is seen as his foil. David is a leader whose personal affections can cloud his decision making, as when he orders Joab, Abishai, and Ittai to deal gently with his rebellious son Absalom (18:5). His ill-advised hope for Absalom contrasts with Joab's swift execution of the usurper (18:14). Joab's execution-style justice makes David's missteps seem less egregious. We may want to laugh at David for the attention he pays to the pretending Tekoite widow (14:4-17),

<sup>13</sup> M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Boston, MA: Thomson, Wadsworth, 2005), 234.

but we have the impression that no widow would receive a hearing from Joab unless it served his interests. While Abner delayed killing Asahel, Joab's brother, and tried to convince him to give up his pursuit, Joab exacts his revenge on Abner (3:27) without uttering a word to him. Even the troops that Joab commands recognize that their general is self-serving, underhanded, and ruthless (18:13). His leadership, cruel and conniving, can attenuate a harsh judgment of David, whose flaws nearly lead to his ruin. David himself draws out the contrast between himself and Joab when he declares that the "sons of Zeruiah" (Joab is a son of Zeruiah) are too violent for him (3:39). We can imagine that Joab, upon hearing the king's exclamation, would have thought to himself, "This king is too gentle for me." Joab's ruthlessness and his violence are the metal foil placed behind David's character that encourages us to prefer the jewel of David's leadership, with all its failings, to the cruelty that we meet in Joab.

#### OTHER CHARACTERS

A specific quality attributed to a minor character usually serves the outcome of the scene (direct character description is rare). Asahel may be as swift as a gazelle (2:18), but that swiftness leads to his own death. Absalom's hair-cutting schedule (14:26) will eventually leave him suspended between heaven and earth, awaiting Joab's spear (18:9-15). The beauty attributed to Tamar quickly captures Amnon's attention (13:1). Ahithophel, described as a good advisor (16:23), offers wise advice to Absalom (17:14). The only quality the narrator provides for Mephibosheth is his disability (4:4, he is lame), which sustains Mephibosheth's claim (if we believe him) that he remained faithful to David (16:1-4 and 19:24-30). Other qualities of minor characters, such as Absalom's rebellious spirit and Tamar's strength of character (she refuses Amnon), emerge only as the plot unfolds. But many of their actions, such as Ahithophel's suicide, cannot be anticipated because of their scanty character development.

Except for David and Joab, the characters in 2 Samuel are episodic, and essential questions about them are left unanswered. What were Absalom's thoughts about killing his father (16:11 and 17:2)? Why did Ahithophel join the rebels? How did Tamar manage in Absalom's house (the narrator sums up the remainder of her life in one line: "So Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom's house" [13:20]). Did Michal love Paltiel (3:15-16)? Did Bathsheba feel raped by a powerful king? The narrator does not invest in these characters, and we struggle to identify with them because we have so little information about their

plight. Whether we want to call them flat characters or agents,<sup>14</sup> one thing is certain: their presence in the story serves the portrait of David and his reign. The narrator's interests lie there.

#### 1.4.4 *The Plot: A Story in Six Acts*

During Saul's reign, Samuel informed the king (and us) that God had already chosen his replacement, one who would be better than he (1 Sam 15:28) and who is like God's own heart (1 Sam 13:14). Thus, before Act 1 of the David Narrative begins, we are already anticipating the introduction of a new character. The story of Saul's reign comes to a tragic end when the narrator announces that the relationship between Saul and Samuel has been irreparably broken (1 Sam 15:35): they would never meet again in life.<sup>15</sup> Beginning in 1 Samuel 16, David becomes the dominant character for the next forty-two chapters of the Bible until his death in 1 Kings 2:10. This narrative can be divided into six acts:

- *Act 1: David's anointing and his flight from King Saul (1 Sam 16–31)*

The beginning of David's public life is characterized by conflict with Saul. Immediately after his anointing he is brought to Saul's court but soon has to flee the king's spear. For much of 1 Samuel 16–31 David manages to escape Saul's deadly pursuit, thus underscoring the theme of the David Narrative: God rescues David. When David's own men reject his (and God's) plan to attack the Philistines and defend Keilah, God assures David of victory (1 Sam 23:1-5). Saul's son Jonathan aligns himself with David (1 Sam 18:1-4) and they make a pact in which David swears to remain loyal to Jonathan and his descendants (1 Sam 20:14-17). The effects of that oath continue into 2 Samuel (see 2 Sam 9:1 and 21:7), long after Jonathan's death. Though David demonstrates his loyalty to Saul, sparing his life on two occasions (1 Sam 24 and 26), he never again risks being in Saul's presence. Fleeing to Philistine territory, he lives under the protection of King Achish of Gath and settles in Ziklag (1 Sam 27:6). With Saul's death, David's life on the run comes to an end.

<sup>14</sup> In *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), E. M. Forster describes a flat character: "In their purest form, they are constructed round a single idea or quality; when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round" (p. 73).

<sup>15</sup> Saul converses with the dead Samuel in 1 Samuel 28:15-19.

- *Act 2: David rules in Hebron (2 Sam 1:1–5:5)*

After mourning the deaths of King Saul and his son Jonathan, David moves back to Judah and establishes his rule in Hebron. The fugitive is now king (2:4), though his reign is by no means secure. Attempts to assert his authority over Saul's dominion are rebuffed and war ensues between the "house of Saul and the house of David" (3:1). A protracted war is avoided when Abner, Saul's chief commander, betrays Ishbaal, Saul's son and successor. David's pact with Abner to absorb Saul's territory under his rule is not thwarted by the murders of Abner and Ishbaal, and these episodes draw to a close when Saul's subjects acclaim David as their king (5:1-3). The narrator signals a caesura with a notice of David's regnal years that anticipates his rule in Jerusalem.

- *Act 3: David establishes his reign in Jerusalem (5:6–8:18)*

With the relocation of David's capital to Jerusalem, a new era of Davidic rule begins. David quickly moves to secure his city, defending it from Philistine aggressors (5:17-25). The relocation of the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem further solidifies his kingship and establishes Jerusalem as his royal city (6:1-23). To bolster his capital, he decides to build a Temple, but God rejects his plan (7:1-29). David then extends his dominion by defeating various enemies (8:1-14), and the Philistines, his main enemy, do not attack again until very late in David's reign (21:15). The strife that lies ahead will be internal to the house of David. The narrator concludes this act by introducing the members of David's court (8:15-18). David, having secured his city, establishes his government.

- *Act 4: Divine rescue for a beguiled king (9:1–20:26)*

The opening episodes in this act tell of a shrewd king who continues to consolidate his rule. Mephibosheth (Jonathan's son), a potential threat to the throne, is brought into David's orbit (9:1-13). Then David settles a score with the Ammonites and their Aramean mercenaries (10:1-19). But these two victories are followed by a series of imprudent decisions that put his life and kingdom at risk. His liaison with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of Uriah are condemned by the prophet Nathan (11:1–12:31). When Amnon, playing sick, wants David to send Tamar to him, David complies (13:1-22). These two missteps do not directly threaten the security of his reign: God forgives David's sin against Uriah and we cannot expect David to have known of Amnon's plan to rape Tamar. But then come more serious lapses in judgment. David fails to hold Amnon accountable for the rape (13:21) and so Absalom takes matters into his own hands. When David falls for Absalom's scam, Amnon is murdered (13:23-39). The chaos in David's family is increasing. Then the king is taken in by a phony widow and concedes to Joab's proposal to

reinstate the future rebel Absalom to his court (14:1-33). But these errors reach their apex when David allows Absalom out of his sight and then must flee Absalom's insurrection (15:1-20:3). Second Samuel 9-20 comes to a climax when God intervenes to rescue David (the main theme of the David Narrative) from what would have been certain defeat. As the story of Absalom's rebellion draws to a close, David is confronted with another short-lived revolt by Sheba the son of Bichri (20:4-22). Once it is quashed, the narrator intervenes with a conclusion similar to that of the previous act: he names the members of David's court (20:23-26). David's reign, which nearly collapsed due to his errors, is once again secure and so he can reestablish his government.

- *Act 5: David's public life draws to a close (21:1-24:25)*

After providing Saul and his sons with proper burial (21:10-14), David grows weary in combat and is ordered off the battlefield for good (21:15-22). This begins his withdrawal from public life. He sings a song that summarizes his life story and outlines how he wants to be remembered (22:1-51). The narrator then signals that David's final words have begun (23:1), a process that will continue until 1 Kings 2:9. And finally, just before our hero exits public life, he builds the first altar in Jerusalem (24:1-25).

- *Act 6: The kingdom is transferred to Solomon and David dies (1 Kgs 1:1-2:12)*

Time has passed. David is now so old and weak that he cannot even keep warm (1 Kgs 1:1). But his physical decline does not prevent him from orchestrating the suppression of another family-based rebellion and seating Solomon on his throne. After he delivers a final discourse to his son, he dies. The narrator concludes with a traditional summary of the king's regnal years (1 Kgs 2:11), and Solomon's reign begins.

This commentary, because it is limited to 2 Samuel, begins with Act 2 of the David Narrative and ends with Act 5. Each act is divided into episodes and each episode is divided into scenes.

## 1.5 The Reader

We stand before an enormously compelling story. The David Narrative, a literary masterpiece, swiftly humbles its interpreters, anyone who would dare to make it "jump o'er times" with ease. Since it presents a world so different from our own, it pleads for a slow and attentive reading. In our information age, the rapid reading of various texts has

become a necessity for survival. We swim in a flood of e-mails and text messages. The David Narrative cannot be consumed as simply another text floating in this sea of words. The Bible (a rather short book in view of its impact on human history and culture) wants its every word to be carefully observed: Why this turn of phrase? Why this detail? Why this episode? Why this point of view? Why this digression now? Why these characters now? Why “Second Samuel” at all? The Bible invites us to recline at its table, not for a drive-through meal, but for what medieval monks called the *lectio divina*, a sacred reading that savors each morsel. Attending to this narrative with its rich detail challenges our view of ourselves and of the world we inhabit.

This commentary is more a “paraphrase” than an “analysis” of the narrative, a distinction I have borrowed from E. M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel*. A paraphrase describes a masterpiece like an art lover (not art critic) who, gazing upon Rembrandt’s *David and Jonathan*, is moved by David’s intense despair (1 Sam 20:41). I hope to attend to our narrator’s canvas in all its vibrant detail, pointing out its interesting brush strokes. But a definitive grasp of the David Narrative lies beyond the scope of this commentary. Here I am guided by the insights of Ephrem the Syrian, a fourth-century writer who wrote a commentary on a gospel harmony known as the *Diatessaron*.<sup>16</sup> As he reflects on the encounter between Zechariah and the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:8-20), he pauses to meditate on the nature of biblical interpretation:

Who is capable of comprehending the extent of what is to be discovered in a single utterance of Yours? For we leave behind in it far more than we take from it, like thirsty people drinking from a fountain. . . . Anyone who encounters Scripture should not suppose that the single one of its riches that he has found is the only one to exist; rather, he should realize that he himself is only capable of discovering that one out of the many riches which exist in it. Nor, because Scripture has enriched him should the reader impoverish it. Rather, if the reader is incapable of finding more, let him acknowledge Scripture’s magnitude. Rejoice because you have found satisfaction, and do not be grieved that there has been something left over by you. A thirsty person rejoices because he has drunk: he is not grieved because he proved incapable of drinking the fountain dry. Let the fountain vanquish your thirst, your thirst should not vanquish the fountain! If your thirst comes to an end while the fountain has not been diminished, then you can drink again whenever you are thirsty; whereas if the fountain had been drained dry once you had had your fill, your victory over it would have proved to your own harm. Give thanks for what

<sup>16</sup> Usually associated with Tatian, the *Diatessaron* was written probably in Syriac around 170 CE.

you have taken away, and do not complain about the superfluity that is left over. What you have taken off with you is your portion, what has been left behind can still be your inheritance.<sup>17</sup>

Reading the Bible is like drinking from a fountain whose waters satiate the thirsty just as the Bible satiates its readers. But, Ephrem reminds us, we leave far more water behind than we can consume. He cautions us not to impoverish the Bible by pretending to limit its meaning with definitive interpretations. Such interpretations suggest that the biblical fountain has been vanquished—its waters have dried up. Rejoice at what we receive and do not be discouraged that we leave so much behind. An inheritance of meaning awaits us. This image of the thirsty person at the fountain impels us to yet another task: the Bible requires many trips to the fountain. It wants to be read again to secure the many details that escape an initial reading. Who is capable of registering the significance of Madame Defarge's knitting on a first reading of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*? But that detail leaps off the page on a second reading! In the same way, the significance of David's opening speech before Saul (1 Sam 17:34-37a) is only fully comprehended when he sings his song at the end of his life (2 Sam 22). The David Narrative, like all classics, begs to be revisited: "you can drink again whenever you are thirsty."

## 1.6 A Final Word

This commentary is not intended to substitute for your personal reading of the portrait of David and his reign. Nothing in these pages wants to replace that unique experience. Since the biblical text is not presented in this commentary, you will need to have the Bible at hand (the NRSV is the version cited unless otherwise indicated). My hope is that the ink that stains these pages renders the biblical page more cogent for you, though the opus we are about to read dwarfs its commentators as poet J. V. Cunningham acknowledges in his poem "To the Reader":<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, 1:18–19. This translation is taken from Sebastian Brock's *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 50–51.

<sup>18</sup> Timothy Steele, ed., *The Poems of J. V. Cunningham* (Athens: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1997), 38.

## To the Reader

Time will assuage.  
Time's verses bury  
Margin and page  
In commentary,  
For gloss demands  
A gloss annexed  
Till busy hands  
Blot out the text,  
And all's coherent.  
Search in this gloss  
No text inherent:  
The text was loss.  
The gain is gloss.

I pray that my busy hands have not rendered the David Narrative so coherent as to have blotted out the mysteries and enigmas that lie within it. Such gain would be mere gloss.