

Did David Murder Saul's Successors in 2 Samuel 21:1–14 and Does It Matter?

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Abstract

This reading reveals the structure of the episode in 2 Samuel 21:1–14 as a story-within-a-story: In the frame story, David tackles the causes of a famine. In the inner story, his attempt to resolve the famine by executing seven of Saul's descendants and the expiation performed by Rizpah are paralleled with the frame story and are distinguished from the cause of the famine. We are directed to the conclusion that David is responsible for the famine after engineering the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. David's exploitation of the differences between Ancient Near Eastern and Israelite law, resulting in seven dead challengers to the throne of Israel, suggests that the episode was compiled as a rejection of kingship; the centralisation of worship, and the promulgation of the law code. The effort of presenting David's actions as honest while undermining his motives causes cracks in the language, some of which have been treated as transmission errors.

Keywords: 2 Samuel 21; David; centralisation of worship; law; archaic 3ms suffix

Introduction

A reference to the terms used in a biblical text occurs throughout the critical history of the text and was widely exploited by the post-biblical and medieval exegetes. Semantics is fundamental to dating and translating texts and is extensively considered in those contexts. As a tool for critical analysis, however, semantics tends to be used only occasionally and is seldom used systematically in relation to an entire text.¹

¹ Walters (2008) offers a fascinating semantic analysis of the Rizpah episode.

In the case of 2 Samuel 21:1–14 dealt with here, a semantic study results in a changed emphasis in the structure and plot of the episode. If the critics are divided over the extent to which David is responsible for the events that follow, this reading supports the critical stance that regards David’s intentions as murderous. My reading suggests that this episode opposes the institution of kingship. The themes that emerge from this reading support a date from the time of the promulgation of the law code, and the episode stands as propaganda for the centralisation of worship. I further hope to demonstrate that grammatical ambiguities can be resolved in relation to the plot that emerges from this reading.

One fundamental reason for the critical reluctance to break down the implications of individual terms systematically is that the very small vocabulary in Biblical Hebrew makes puns and ambiguities unavoidable. In this episode the writer seems to have had the overlapping implications of a small vocabulary well in hand. As a result, the same method which I use to break down the imagery of the ritual killing of Saul’s sons also reveals David’s methods in constructing the argument for the killing in his conversation with the Gibeonites. The puns and double-meanings are not accidental but fundamental to the episode in which David exploits language and the law code in order to break the law and lie to his people. Thus a critical component of this reading is a description of the extent to which the differences between Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) laws and biblical laws are essential to the progression of the plot and fundamental to my claim that David is deliberately exploiting the differences between these laws in order to destroy the threat of a Saulide claim to the throne.

A test for the validity of this method lies in the extent to which I can relate the puns and wordplay to the plot and its implications. Here I confront the problem that the plot and its implications shift under the pressure that I am applying to the language.² I can confirm that in the case of this particular text many of my conclusions are in line with those of other methods of analysis. As such, this method is simply another tool in the box which may or may not lend its weight to one point of view or another. My results oppose some points of view³ and support others.⁴

² I did not find this in the comparable study that I did of Jeremiah 36, where the language is rich with relevant imagery and word-play but did not suggest to me an underlying story that contradicted the ostensible story (Deken 2017). In Genesis 14 as here, we are possibly dealing with an episode that never actually took place and the language is about the imagery and plot and not about the historical facts (Deken 2018).

³ Chavel (2003) and Darshan (2013). McCarter (1984) suggests that the episode was written to exonerate David, not to implicate him as I suggest.

⁴ Brueggemann (1988). Malul (1996) quotes several other commentators citing specifically the predictability of the extent to which David benefits from all the deaths associated with his rise to power.

2 Samuel 21:1-14

There is famine in the land of Israel and in accordance with Israelite law David consults the oracle as to the cause of the famine. David advises us that the oracle confirms that Saul broke an oath by committing a crime of bloodguilt against the Gibeonites. Under ANE law the descendants of the guilty party are held responsible. In contrast, under Israelite law the king is responsible for expiation in the event of famine, plague or war. Necessarily, under Israelite law, Saul cannot have committed the crime that initiated the famine because he is dead and can no longer atone for his crimes. However, David undertakes to act on behalf of the Gibeonites, and seven descendants of Saul are executed under the ANE law that the Gibeonites espouse. But Rizpah undermines the ANE ritual in order to protect the bodies of the Saulides, and David breaks with ANE law in order to recover the bodies of Saul and Jonathan and to bury them together with these seven Saulides in the family tomb at Gibeah. The executions under ANE law, followed by the Judean burial first of the seven Saulides, and then of Saul and Jonathan, represent these two distinct law codes: Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern.

Verses 1–6

Saul is already dead at the beginning of this episode and according to Exod 18:2, Deut 24:16 and Jer 31:29, descendants are not liable for the crimes of their fathers. Num 35:33 confirms the connection between blood, land and expiation, represented here by famine:

“Blood pollutes the land and the land can have no expiation for blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it.”

Under Israelite law Saul’s sons *cannot* be held responsible for the famine in expiation for a crime committed by Saul. Therefore the famine would not have occurred during David’s reign if David were not responsible for the initial crime. David is drawing on ANE law codes in opposition to the law codes of Palestine when he ascertains that the famine is on account of Saul’s having shed the blood of the Gibeonites. It becomes clear in the course of the text that David has chosen the Gibeonites as the aggrieved party both because they rely on him for patronage and because they rely on ANE law and not Israelite/Judean law.

2 Sam 21:1
וַיִּהְיֶה רָעַב בְּיָמַי דָּוִד שְׁלֵשׁ שָׁנִים עַל־אֲשֶׁר־הָמִית אֶת־הַגִּבְעֹנִים:
וַיִּהְיֶה רָעַב בְּיָמַי דָּוִד שְׁלֵשׁ שָׁנִים עַל־אֲשֶׁר־הָמִית אֶת־הַגִּבְעֹנִים:
וַיִּהְיֶה רָעַב בְּיָמַי דָּוִד שְׁלֵשׁ שָׁנִים עַל־אֲשֶׁר־הָמִית אֶת־הַגִּבְעֹנִים:
וַיִּהְיֶה רָעַב בְּיָמַי דָּוִד שְׁלֵשׁ שָׁנִים עַל־אֲשֶׁר־הָמִית אֶת־הַגִּבְעֹנִים:

2 Sam 21:1 There was famine during the reign of David, year after year for three years. David inquired of the Lord, and the Lord replied, “It is because of the bloodguilt of Saul and [his] house, for he put some Gibeonites to death.”⁵

The language of the first verse invokes Saul’s name by playing on the letters shin and lamed.⁶ That the play on shin and lamed is evocative of Saul’s name is supported by the association with Shalishah and Shaalayim, where Saul seeks his lost sheep in 1 Sam 9:4. It points us, and David, to the cause of the famine, before the consultation at the high place occurs. The “three years,” apart from the play on Saul’s name, would, in conjunction with subsequent events in this episode, suggest that Saul died three years before. This combination of hints would make it clear to David, who perhaps knows how Saul died, that the oracle is going to point to Saul.

It is essential to this reading of the episode that David knows what the oracle is going to say, because it leads him to choose to hear the oracle at the high place at Gibeah instead of at Shiloh. The additional play on the letters shin and lamed in the name Shiloh would ostensibly support David’s claim that the oracle points to Saul and would for the same reason take him to Shiloh. But the priests at Shiloh would not lie for David and his insistence on hearing the oracle at Gibeah suggests that what David has in mind requires his personal intervention. The root שנה, meaning “year” in this context, is also (a pun on) the root for the number “two.” The number “two” here in this first verse where the crime is presented coincides with the introduction of the “two” primary Saulides, Saul and Jonathan, later in the text, and parallels the pun on שבע meaning “oath” and “seven,” representing elements of the death of the “seven” Saulides in the parallel “inner” episode.

At the high place at Shiloh, the Israelite priesthood would mediate his formal request, in his role as king seeking to avert the consequences of “national offence,” for the cause of the famine. However, as David is in the process of establishing his capital in Jerusalem, this move from the North to the South would have the desirable effect of undermining the established high place and its priesthood, in favour of the high place associated with Jerusalem. The politically motivated displacement of Shiloh would then constitute a good reason for David’s choosing to hear the oracle at Gibeah. David takes advantage of these politically plausible considerations to liaise with the oracle at

⁵ All translations are from the JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh (1999). Where my translation differs, this will be discussed in the text.

⁶ The root שנה occurs less than half the number of times in Samuel compared to the average in the Tanakh (roughly). Three occurrences of this relatively rare root in one verse confirm the suggestion raised by the text that the writer is looking for words with shin and/or lamed that play on Saul’s name.

Gibeah.⁷ It is critical to David's considerations that at Shiloh the priests would hear his request, then take it to the oracle and relay the reply to David. At Gibeah, David consults the oracle and relays the reply to the Gibeonites himself.

Driver after Wellhausen suggests that the article in the phrase *שִׁמְדָה תִּיב*⁸ may be an archaic form of the 3ms pronoun *הַתִּיב הַיָּמֵד* that was originally part of "HIS house of blood." If the received text is left unaltered, the oracle would merely be itemising the elements that have caused the famine: "Saul" and "the house of blood" (or "bloodguilt"), but would not specify the relationship between the elements "Saul and his house of blood," and Saul need not be the *cause* of the bloodguilt. Driver's suggestion has become an entrenched part of the hermeneutic framework in which this text is read. Thus the critical tradition supports an alteration of the received text in order to support exactly the interpretation that David has specifically gone to Gibeah to impose on this text: The language invokes Saul's name by playing on shin and lamed, because Saul is responsible for bloodguilt in respect of the Gibeonites. In contrast to Driver, I am suggesting that the MT is correct as it stands but that in translation it has been wrongly punctuated (not wrongly divided), and that the final phrase "because he slew the Gibeonites" has been added by David (not by a later editor), who is deliberately relating independent elements of the oracle, "Saul" and "the house of blood," to each other.

If David knows what the oracle is going to say and he deliberately consults the oracle in a place where he can intercede with the Lord himself, in this crucial phrase where David shifts the blame for the bloodshed onto Saul, the oracle does not provide a causal relationship between the elements of the oracle, namely "Saul" and "the house of death." Only after he has reported on the oracle does David add the confirming motive "for he put the Gibeonites to death." It is this last phrase, which links two of the elements of the oracle to each other and to an unrecorded event, which incriminates Saul.

There is, however, a possible third element in the oracle after "Saul" and "bloodguilt." David's report of the oracle omits to mention himself as an implicit element of the oracle, and indeed his name need not be mentioned by the oracle as he is present at the time. The events of the remainder of the episode suggest that the oracle points *David* to "Saul," and to the "house of blood," just as David is being directed to Saul in the language of this first verse, when using words that use the letters shin and lamed, the language whispers to David words that play on Saul's name. David, in his report of the

⁷ 2 Sam 24 presents an episode in which "plague" is the consequence of a census. The results of the census make it clear both why David would be threatened by an Israelite monarchy, and also why he has to ensure that he is not accused of having committed a crime against that monarchy: 2 Sam 24:9 "in Israel there were 800,000 soldiers ready to draw the sword, and the men of Judah numbered 500,000."

⁸ "The words in MT. have simply been wrongly divided" (Driver 1890, 268).

oracle, fails to mention that the oracle is directed to him personally. He then interpolates a causal relationship between the oracle and the crime. That his statement “he killed the Gibeonites” is an interpolation, and that Saul is not guilty of “the house of blood,” is proved by subsequent events, when the death of the seven Saulides does not break the famine, and instead Rizpah expiates the death of Saul’s descendants, and David is required to atone for events that lie outside this episode but are recorded in the text, and which it would appear are in fact the cause of the famine. Thus a literal translation of verse 1, punctuated according to this reading of the text, would be:

David sought the face of the Lord and the Lord said: “‘To Saul and to the house of blood’, on account of the death of the Gibeonites”.

2 Sam 21:2 וַיִּקְרָא הַמֶּלֶךְ לַגִּבְעֹנִים וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם וְהַגִּבְעֹנִים לֹא מָכַנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַמֶּלֶךְ כִּי אָם- מִיָּתֵר הָאֲמֹרִי וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נִשְׁבְּעוּ לָהֶם וַיִּבְקֹשׁ שָׂאוּל לְהַכֹּתָם בְּקִנְאָתוֹ לְבְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְהוּדָה:

2 Sam 21:2 The king summoned the Gibeonites and spoke to them.—Now the Gibeonites were not of Israelite stock, but a remnant of the Amorites, to whom the Israelites had given an oath; and Saul had tried to wipe them out in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah.

In the previous verse, David may be taking advantage of objectively verifiable political grounds to substantiate his personal preference for hearing the oracle at Gibeah. Similarly here (v. 2), we are confronted with the fact that the Gibeonites are not Israelites, which David construes as a motive for *Saul's* attack on them. The fact that the Gibeonites are not Israelites is in fact *David's* primary motive for selecting Gibeah for hearing the oracle, because although they are responsible for the care of the high place they cannot transact with the oracle on his behalf. But, at Gibeah, David should ask the prophet to intercede. The fact that the Gibeonites are not Israelites again plays into David’s hands as he uses his authority to waive this requirement, possible only among the Gibeonites who observe ANE law:

The belief in sacral kingship, prevalent at Ugarit, Egypt, and Mesopotamia, that a king mediates between the divine and human spheres, is absent from Deuteronomy.⁹

For David, the possibility of dealing with the famine in relation to ANE law overrules the difficulty of accusing Saul of bloodguilt in what is presented here and elsewhere as Saul’s place of birth.¹⁰

The significance of Saul’s apparent crime against the Gibeonites is based on the oath that the Israelites were tricked into giving the Gibeonites in Judg 9. Although the oath that the Israelites made with the Gibeonites is in the text, there is no reference to any

⁹ Knoppers (1996, 329).

¹⁰ Also in I Chr 8:29–33, but these texts may depend on each other.

crime that Saul committed against the Gibeonites. This oath with the Israelites is the reason for the Gibeonites being found here in Gibeah manning the high place. There has to have been an oath for David to be able to invoke the ANE oath-breaking protocol—the immolation of the criminal or his descendants. David treats the word “oath,” שבע, as a pun raising the number in question to “seven.”¹¹ Once the problem has been described in terms of an oath, the matter of retribution is self-evident as the ANE law code entails the immolation of descendants of the guilty party. That the descendants should pay for the crimes of their fathers is precluded by Deuteronomy (24:16)¹² but is attested in the Hittite law code.¹³ The crime against the Gibeonites is not in the text and certainly did not take place to the extent that David suggests in that there are still Gibeonites left for him to consult. The fact that the Gibeonites are here in Gibeah performing the secondary duties of caring for the high place rather suggests that the Israelites have in fact fully performed their part of the oath, in spite of having been tricked into it. The Gibeonites may be a “remnant” but they are a remnant of the Amorites, not of the Gibeonites. It is however easy to suggest to almost anyone, and certainly to a group of subservient people, that they have in some way been wronged or unfairly treated, and

- 1) there is the evidence of the famine itself to prove to the Gibeonites that they have been wronged;
- 2) their king is standing in front of them, wanting to atone;
- 3) the Gibeonites have every interest in acting in accordance with their king’s preferences, their original king and kinsman being dead;
- 4) as David is playing the law codes off against each other and in fact behaving beautifully in relation to ANE law, the Gibeonites do not have any reason to believe that anything is wrong.

From David’s suggestion that Saul acted “in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah,” it would appear that “the people of Israel and Judah” would have benefitted from the death of the Gibeonites. It is apparently in their interest that their king should incur bloodguilt on their behalf, which, as a national offence, would necessarily result in famine, plague or war.

:יְהוָה 2 Sam 21:3 וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל־הַגִּבְעֹנִים מַה אַעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם וּבְמַה אֶכְפֹּר וּבְרָכוּ אֶת־גְּזֵלַת יְהוָה:

¹¹ Just as in v. 1 שנה in “year after year” simultaneously raises a spectre of “two,” the implications of which we are still coming to in this text.

¹² Deut 5:9 is not convenient for my discussion here.

¹³ “Murshili, the Hittite king (c. 1340–1310), composes a prayer to the ... gods concerning a catastrophic plague) which had broken out in the Hittite Empire during the reign of his father” (Malamat 1955, 2).

2 Sam 21:3 David asked the Gibeonites, “What shall I do for you? How shall I make expiation, so that you may bless the Lord’s own people?”

David’s offer to atone on behalf of the Gibeonites implies that they can, or should, ask to be compensated in a way that is beyond the mandate of the Gibeonites themselves. I have already suggested that the immolation of descendants of the person who committed the crime is built into the definition of the crime of oath breaking. But David here uses the word **אָכַפֵּר**, which confirms that this is the nature of the compensation that he has in mind. The term **אָכַפֵּר** includes a number of implications, which the writer here seems to be drawing on: Apart from “expiation” or “atonement,” which is the overt meaning in David’s conversation with the Gibeonites, the term can mean to “cover” or “hide” (Lev 16:30). This may prefigure Rizpah’s anxious efforts to cover or hide the bodies from scavengers. Her action can be regarded as analogous to David’s own atonement after the events of the sub-plot have played themselves out, confirming that Rizpah’s actions do constitute a form of atonement or expiation. It may also suggest that David is covering up or hiding a crime even while he appears to be atoning. In Gen 6.14,¹⁴ the root is translated as “pitch,” a black impenetrable substance used to cover or seal the ark. David is using the root to cover one crime with another.

2 Sam 21:4 וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ הַגִּבְעֹנִים אִין־לִי כֶסֶף וְזָהָב עִם־שְׂאוּל וְעִם־בֵּיתוֹ וְאִין־לָנוּ אִישׁ לְהַמִּית בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר מִה־אַתֶּם אֹמְרִים אַעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם:

2 Sam 21:4 The Gibeonites answered him, “We have no claim for silver and gold against Saul and his household, and we have no claim on the life of any other man in Israel.” And [David] responded, “Whatever you say I will do for you”.

The Gibeonites (unlike David) do realise that they cannot knowingly commit one crime while atoning for another, so they point out to the king that there is no financial compensation specified for bloodguilt, and as non-Israelites they are not allowed to demand anything more.¹⁵ David’s willingness to take responsibility for the act of the atonement, like his introduction of the word “atone” in verse 3, confirms the nature of the demand that he requires the Gibeonites to make. Because he is prepared to act on their behalf, he must be inviting them to ask for a form of redress that they cannot exercise themselves. At the same time, the Gibeonites appear reluctant to exercise the right that David is extending to them.

¹⁴ **Gen 6.14** וְכִפַּרְתָּ אֹתָהּ מִבֵּיתָּ וּמִחוּץ בְּכֹפֶר:

Gen 6:14 ... and cover it inside and out with pitch.

¹⁵ “As resident aliens ... protected by oath they are empowered to make certain pecuniary claims (“silver and gold”) against Israelites to protect their interests. They are not, however, protected by blood-feud laws like native Israelites” (McCarter 1984, 441).

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר כָּלְנוּ וְאֲשֶׁר דָּמָה־לָּנוּ נִשְׁמַדְנוּ מִהַתְּנַצֵּב בְּכָל־
גְּבַל יִשְׂרָאֵל: **2 Sam 21:5**

2 Sam 21:5 Thereupon they said to the king, “The man who massacred us and planned to exterminate us, so that we should not survive in all the territory of Israel –

Even here in verse 5, where the Gibeonites are apparently confirming the charge which they are acting in terms of, they are struggling with the definition of the crime that Saul is meant to have committed. The phrase “planned for us to be exterminated”¹⁶ distances Saul from the crime in two ways: Saul becomes the “planner” or “deviser” and not the executor; and the actual destruction takes place in the passive (niph'al), absolving Saul from active participation in the crime. McCarter recommends a textual emendation after Wellhausen converting the phrase to the hiphil להשמידנו, making Saul the agent of the destruction.¹⁷ This alteration supports the interpretation that the alteration of the 3ms pronoun in the first verse imposes on the text, but this is not what appears in the text and is the second alteration that is required to make the text conform to critical opinion of what it is about. In this text the Gibeonites are struggling to find the grammatical construction in which Saul would be guilty of their destruction.

וַיִּתֵּן־לָנוּ שִׁבְעָה אָנָשִׁים מִבְּנֵי וְהוֹקֵעָנוּם לַיהוָה בְּגִבְעַת שָׂאוּל בְּהִיר יְהוָה ס
וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲנִי אֲתֵּן: **2 Sam 21:6**

2 Sam 21:6 Let seven of his male issue be handed over to us, and we will impale them before the Lord in Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the Lord.” – And the king replied, “I will do so.”

In verse 6, the Gibeonites, still struggling with their Hebrew grammar, ask David for the seven Saulides to be “given” in the passive (hoph'al), casting David, not themselves, in the role of the agent of the transaction. The formalising of the undertaking unfortunately stresses Gibeah as Saul’s birthplace, “in Gibeah of Saul,” suggesting the discomfort that the Gibeonites are feeling at the undertaking. The king counters by laying some emphasis on his confirmation “I, I will give/do so.”¹⁸ This duplicated reference to himself may be intended to remind the perhaps reluctant Gibeonites of David’s royal prerogative, but also suggests that the king, by insisting that he is responsible for the handover, is still trying to allay the fears of the Gibeonites in respect of what they are doing.

¹⁶ Own translation.

¹⁷ Wellhausen (1871, 209).

¹⁸ “Since a finite verb by itself indicates the person, it can be said that, whenever a verb occurs with a pronoun referring to its subject, some extra nuance is intended” (Joüon and Muraoka 2009, 505, par. 146a).

The Story within the Story (Verses 7–10)

בְּיַד יְהוָה וְיָד וַיְבִין יְהוֹנָתָן בֶּן־שָׁאוּל: הַיְהוָה אֲשֶׁר בְּיַמְתָּם
עַל־מִפְּי־בִשְׁתַּת בֶּן־יְהוֹנָתָן בֶּן־שָׁאוּל עַל־שְׂבַעַת יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר בְּיַמְתָּם
בֶּן־דָּוִד וַיְבִין יְהוֹנָתָן בֶּן־שָׁאוּל:

2 Sam 21:7 The king spared Mephibosheth son of Jonathan son of Saul, because of the oath before the Lord between the two, between David and Jonathan son of Saul.

In his anxiousness to appease the Gibeonites, David has emphasised that he is personally responsible for the handing over of the Saulides to the Gibeonites. David then has to excuse Jonathan's son (v.7). In excusing Jonathan's son from the ritual, David himself invokes his oath to Jonathan:

Nor shall you fail to show me the Lord's faithfulness while I am alive; nor, when I am dead, shall you ever discontinue your faithfulness to my house—not even after the Lord has wiped out every one of David's enemies from the face of the earth. Thus has Jonathan covenanted with the house of David (1 Sam 20:13–16).

This is our first indication that another oath or oaths, apart from that sworn between the Israelites and the Gibeonites, is relevant to this episode. Critically, there is a conflict between the oaths. In order to expiate the breaking of Saul's oath with the Gibeonites, David has to break his own oaths with Saul and with Jonathan not to “cut off” their descendants. At the same time, Jonathan's son Mephibosheth is precluded from the execution, disguised as atonement ritual, because he is “lame” and hence not fit for sacrifice,¹⁹ which is the real reason why David has to excuse him and not the oath he took to Jonathan and to Saul (1 Sam 24:22–23), which would have precluded *any* of Saul's descendants from being included in this atonement ritual.

וַיִּקַּח הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־שְׁנֵי בָנֵי רִצְפָּה בַת־אִיָּה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְשָׁאוּל אֶת־אֲרַמְנֵי וְאֶת־
מִפְּבֹשֶׁת וְאֶת־חַמְשֵׁת בָּנֵי מִיכָל בַת־שָׁאוּל אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְעַדְרֵי אֵל בֶּן־בָּרְזַיִל הַמְּהוֹלָתִי:

2 Sam 21:8 Instead, the king took Armoni and Mephibosheth, the two sons that Rizpah daughter of Aiah bore to Saul, and the five sons that Michal daughter of Saul bore to Adriel son of Barzilai, the Meholathite.

Although the JPS does consistently translate the means of execution as “impalement,” there is still critical conjecture regarding the question of whether the Saulides were (a) hung or (b) impaled and left exposed.²⁰ This semantic reading confirms impalement

¹⁹ 2 Sam 9:13

²⁰ “Hebrew *wehoq`anum*, the meaning of which is uncertain. Apart from the present passage, *hoqia`* occurs only in Num 25:4, where it also describes a form of execution ‘in the sun’. The rabbis (Sanhedrin 34b) took it to mean ‘hang’, and the Greek translation of the present passage, *kai exeliasomen*, suggests crucifixion in the sun” (McCarter 1984, 442).

and then exposure as the method of execution and confirms the validity of this literary-semantic reading as a means of accessing this text:

Van Seters specifically queries the appearance of Barzillai in this episode:

For the author of David and the Gibeonites to suggest, by this inclusion of Barzillai in this incidental way, that prior to the Absalom revolt David had previously been responsible for the massacre of his five grandsons, makes the friendship between David and Barzillai seem quite ludicrous.²¹

I would suggest that Barzillai has been brought into the episode specifically to describe the means of execution of the Saulides. Barzillai means “man of iron.” In addition, the Aramaic word ברז means “to bore, pierce.” The combination of “man of iron” (a long spear) with “pierce” suggests that the Saulides are impaled. Barzillai is a “Meholathite,” which invokes the expression להחול במחולות, which refers to twisting or writhing (in pain?) and in the same way in 2 Sam 3:29 the root describes a man who “whirls about on Abner’s sword(?)”

Similarly, there is textual confusion in verse 8 because Merab, not Michal, was married to Adriel (1 Sam 17.19). This confusion could have occurred over the husbands’ names: עזריאל—“my help is God” and פלתיאל—“my deliverance is God.” Bear in mind that עזר is the Aramaic form of the word עזר—Hebrew: “help, succour”; these two names may have been interchangeable in the mind of the author. More likely, however, Adriel is invoked because he is the son of Barzillai, and the writer needs Barzillai to describe the execution.

This episode at 2 Sam 21:1–14 significantly informs the emotional tenor of the episode at 2 Sam 6:16–23, in which David returns to Jerusalem with the ark and is met by Michal, his wife and Saul’s daughter. That David would already have decided, having finally eliminated all of Saul’s descendants except Mephibosheth, not to father any more Saulides with Saul’s daughter is extremely plausible. That she is able to have children is implicit in the verb יכל—“to be able”—in her name.

As a noun, מיכל may refer to a “brook” or “stream”. A stream at the place of execution would have been extremely welcome to Rizpah and implies figuratively the soothing presence of water and of their (the Saulides’) mother on the rock (see below). This imagery effectively implicates Michal in Rizpah’s efforts on the rock and exonerates her to some extent from the accusation that it is Rizpah the concubine and not Saul’s daughter who performs the atonement. It would appear that the writer prefers to have Rizpah perform the expiation to place the emphasis on the description of the crime that her name implies, rather than include Michal and place the emphasis on the softening

21 Van Seters (2011, 541).

implications of a stream at the place of the crime. Further, just as with the “ludicrous” inclusion of Barzillai’s name, there were therefore more literary reasons to include Michal in this episode than Merab and we have to bear in mind that it is possible that this episode referring to the execution of these seven Saulides is entirely fictional and functions only to implicate David in the deaths of Saul and Jonathan.

2 Sam 21:9 וַיִּתְּנֵם בְּיַד הַגִּבְעוֹנִים וַיִּקְרְעוּם בְּהַר לְפָנַי יְהוָה וַיִּפְּלוּ שְׁבַע־עֵתַיִם יַחַד וְהֵם הִמְתּוּ בַיּוֹם קִצְיִר בְּרֵאשִׁיטִים תַּחֲלֵת קִצְיִר שְׁעָרִים:

2 Sam 21:9 and he handed them over to the Gibeonites. They impaled them on the mountain before the Lord; all seven of them perished at the same time. They were put to death in the first days of the harvest, the beginning of the barley harvest.

The occurrence of the phrase “the beginning” echoes the chet-lamed formation in the previous verse **הַמַּחֲלֵת** in the phrase “Adriel, son of Barzillai the Meholathite.” The root **חלל** means “pollute, profane, defile.” This confluence of imagery would seem to suggest that the writhing death of these men is a defilement or a profanity—not the atonement as which David is presenting it.

2 Sam 21:10 וַתִּקַּח רִצְפָה בַת־אִיָּה אֶת־הַשִּׁק וַתַּטְּהוּ לָהּ אֶל־הַצּוּר מִתַּחֲלֵת קִצְיִר עַד גִּתְדֵי־מַיִם יַעֲלִיחֵם מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹא־נִתְּנָה עוֹף־הַשָּׁמַיִם לָנוּחַ עֲלֵיהֶם יוֹמָם וְאֶת־חַיֵּי הַשָּׂדֶה לָלֶלֶה:

2 Sam 21:10 Then Rizpah daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it on a rock for herself, and she stayed there from the beginning of the harvest until rain from the sky fell on the bodies; she did not let the birds of the sky settle on them by day or the wild beasts [approach] by night.

That they are left exposed on a rock is suggested by the introduction of Rizpah daughter of Aiah. The name **רִצְפָה** is derived from “a glowing stone, or coal,” and is also used for “pavement,” derived from the root **רצף** for “to fit together.” An **איה** is a bird of prey—a falcon or a kite. It would seem that having been impaled, writhing in anguish on the iron heads of spears(?), the Saulides are laid out on hot stones where birds of prey circle above them.

The effect of this dramatic and poignant imagery derived from the names of the grandfather, nursemaid, and mother of the Saulides is to tie Rizpah’s actions inalienably only to the death of these seven Saulides. Based on the language of this text, it is not possible to include expiation of either the famine or the deaths of Saul and Jonathan in Rizpah’s action. The result of Rizpah’s action is that the death of these seven Saulides, rather than representing atonement for the crime that caused the famine, represents a crime that itself is atoned for by Rizpah. The interrelationship between the language and the action of these verses 7–10 serves to alter the narrative form of the text, so that it is not continuous with the events of the frame story, but rather separates these verses into an episode that exists within, and reflects elements of, the frame story.

Rizpah's efforts complicate David's position enormously:

- 1) By preventing scavengers from approaching the bodies, she is forestalling the closure that would be necessary to David's act as an act of atonement.
- 2) Her actions constitute a form of atonement in themselves, suggesting that David's immolation of the seven Saulides was not an act of atonement, but a crime entailing some form of expiation.
- 3) The famine has not ended, implying that the initial crime has not yet been atoned for.
- 4) David has been pretending that this episode is playing out in terms of ANE law. Rizpah is treating the episode as being entirely unlawful and is making her own reparations in terms of the law of the land of Israel.

2 Sam 21:12 וַיֵּלֶךְ דָּוִד וַיִּקַּח אֶת־עֲצָמוֹת שָׂאוּל וְאֶת־עֲצָמוֹת יְהוֹנָתָן בְּנוֹ מֵאֵת בְּעֵלִי בְּיַשׁ גִּלְעָד אֲשֶׁר גָּבְּוּ אֹתָם מִן־חֶבֶן בְּיַת־שֵׁן אֲשֶׁר תָּלוּם שָׁם הַפְּלִשְׁתִּים בְּיוֹם הַכּוֹת פְּלִשְׁתִּים אֶת־שָׂאוּל בְּגִלְבּוֹעַ׃

2 Sam 21:12 And David went and took the bones of Saul and of his son Jonathan from the citizens of Jabesh-Gilead, who had made off with them from the public square of Beth-Shean, where the Philistines had hung them up on the day that the Philistines killed Saul at Gilboa.

David decides to brazen it out and he collects the bodies of Saul and Jonathan for re-interment. Having already had to admit to oaths in respect of the descendants of Saul and Jonathan, David now has to remind us, at a time when we are looking at the bodies of seven dead Saulides, of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan.

2 Sam 21:13 וַיֵּלֶךְ מִשָּׁם אֶת־עֲצָמוֹת שָׂאוּל וְאֶת־עֲצָמוֹת יְהוֹנָתָן בְּנוֹ וַיֵּאֱסֹפוּ אֶת־עֲצָמוֹת הַמִּוֹקְעִים׃

2 Sam 21:13 He brought up the bones of Saul and of his son Jonathan from there; and he gathered the bones of those who had been impaled.

Apparently acting out of compassion for Rizpah, David gathers together all the bones. The bones of *nine* Saulides are implicated in this gathering, but still the prevailing critical opinion is that David is acting innocently.

2 Sam 21:14 וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֶת־עַצְמוֹת־שָׁאוּל וַיהוֹנָתָן בְּנוֹ בְּאֶרֶץ בְּנֵימִן בְּצִלְעַב בְּקִבְרֵי קִישׁ אֲבוֹ
וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֹל אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּה הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיַּעֲתֶר אֱלֹהִים לְאֶרֶץ אֲחִזַּיִיכֹן:

2 Sam 21:14 And they buried the bones of Saul and of his son Jonathan in Zela, in the territory of Benjamin,²² in the tomb of his father Kish. And when all that the king had commanded was done, God responded to the plea of the land thereafter.

The narrator, having mentioned in the previous verse that the bones of Saul and Jonathan were gathered together with those of the seven Saulides, here leaves out all mention of the seven when he describes the re-interment of Saul and Jonathan. The final mention of the “plea of the land” is associated only with the interment of Saul and Jonathan. Rizpah therefore remains responsible for the atonement for the death of the seven Saulides.

How Is the “Story Within” (Verses 7–10) Parallel to the Frame Story?

In the frame story Saul broke his oath with the Gibeonites, initiating a famine which entails expiation and which the king necessarily undertakes to perform.

In the story within, David breaks his oaths to Saul and to Jonathan in order to execute their descendants in expiation.

In the frame story, the iteration of the word שְׁנָה contains an implicit reference to the “two” bodies of Saul and Jonathan which will finally enter the story in the concluding episode.

Here the word שִׁבְעַת includes a reference to the “seven” Saulides who will be executed. It is the pun in this episode which points to the pun on שְׁנָה in the frame story and confirms the suggestion that the famine “year after year” derives from the death of two Saulides.

Both episodes entail a discussion of atonement, or reparation for a crime.

Finally, it would appear that both episodes concern the death of Saul and his descendants.

We know that it is emphatically David אֲנִי אֲתָן who is responsible for the handing over of the Saulides. That this episode is analogous to the frame story suggests that when the

22 The reference to “Benjamin” (בְּנֵי־יִמִן), may serve to invoke the oaths that appear to be the subject of this episode in that the “right hand” יָמֵן is the one that is raised to confirm an oath.

Gibeonites appear not to have been the cause of the famine, David is responsible for the crime.

Conclusion: Does It Matter?

If Rizpah has to expiate for the death of the seven Saulides, their deaths cannot have atoned for the crime that initiated the famine. This leaves us looking for the actual crime that initiated the famine. If we reconsider the oracle, we can establish that the oracle does refer to Saul and to the house of blood, but not on account of the death of the Gibeonites. I have already suggested that the oracle may be pointing to David as having committed a crime against Saul and having created the house of blood.

This text represents the only reference to the existence of the seven Saulides.²³ These Saulides need never have existed. Their deaths may be a metaphor for the deaths of Saul and Jonathan and the breaking of an oath by David.

Having suggested that David is responsible for the deaths of Saul and Jonathan by demonstrating that the only way David could end the famine is by atoning for their deaths, we are left wondering why the episode, tarnished by factual inaccuracies and compromising the image of David, has been retained in the text. We have to return to David's attitude to the signs that he has committed a crime and his response to the oracle. David essentially treats this sharp, biting famine which brings suffering to his people as a natural event: it is caused by the weather. On account of the willingness of the people to believe that it has been sent by God he takes the opportunity to remove the remaining challengers to the northern throne. But his refusal to accept responsibility for the famine as an act of God is contradicted by the events. He is compelled by Rizpah's subversion of his atonement and her efforts of atoning for a crime which *he* has committed, to atone for the crime which initiated these events.

Whatever David does or does not believe, he is forced to act as if he believes that the famine was caused by a God angered by his breaking of his oaths and his murder of the king and the crown prince of Israel "three years" before. The episode itself demonstrates that God does rule over the sequence of cause and effect in history: David's final acquiescence when he participates in the atonement for the deaths of Saul and Jonathan and the seven Saulides demonstrates that God's outrage was responsible for the famine and that David's crimes had to be atoned for before God. This theological demonstration renders David's political machinations futile and restores the authority of the priesthood, and of God.

23 "This is just a case of the author of the Gibeonites narrative exercising literary license for the sake of his own story by inventing more offspring for the house of Saul" (Van Seters 2011, 541).

This episode demonstrates that different places of worship within Israel permitted different religious practices based on different law codes, facilitating “shopping” for a verdict, as David does here. The episode suggests that in the eyes of the writer, independent places of worship allowed for the application of different and sometimes conflicting law codes. That this episode precedes the period of the centralisation of worship and may be propaganda for that centralisation places the episode in the pre-exilic period. The play on different law codes and this analysis of the damage that this could do suggest an interest in an authoritative law code. David’s abuses are presented by the priesthood as typical of an unfettered kingship. David’s actions suggest that he believes that he is not required to believe that God rules over the sequence of historical events and here tries to drive a wedge between the supposed cause and its effect. David’s standpoint is refuted by the story and the language of the text, even at the risk of undermining the first king of the longest-lived dynasty in history.

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