

**DISCOVERING DAVID IN LIGHT OF 1 SAMUEL 25:  
A NARRATIVE CRITICAL READING OF 1 SAMUEL 24-26**

Adam Brown  
McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, ON

*Introduction*

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate that 1 Sam 25 is an integral component of 1 Sam 24-26 and that it is an essential chapter in order to fully understand the narrator's characterization of David.

This paper will be structured around three main sections. The first will establish the literary coherence of 1 Sam 24-26. The second will identify and evaluate David's men (in 1 Sam 24/26) and Abigail (in 1 Sam 25) as David's rhetorical alter-egos. The third will draw conclusions about David's character from these observations.

This paper will seek to demonstrate that in 1 Sam 24-26 David acts with both restraint and unrestraint and that these seemingly opposite manifestations of character both stem from David's political brilliance and moral deficiency.

*Literary Coherence of 1 Samuel 24-26*

In order to demonstrate the literary coherence of 1 Sam 24-26, the two outside chapters must first be studied in order to establish the boundaries of this literary unit. The similarities in setting, plot, and characterization between 1 Sam 24 and 26 clearly invite the narratee to consider these two chapters together:

At a surface reading, the two versions are parallel and in some sense the second is redundant. The story line is the same in the two tellings. David by stealth has sleeping Saul in his power. David can kill Saul but he refuses. David will not strike the life of the "LORD's anointed." In both cases, the narrative ends with an exchange of speeches between the two. Saul is grateful and yields to David.

David is noble, reticent, and confident. Both accounts show how the flow of the narrative and of the historical process is toward David's success and Saul's demise.<sup>1</sup>

These glaring similarities compel the narratee to consider 1 Sam 24 and 26 as having been intentionally written to be considered together for several reasons.<sup>2</sup>

First, both chapters are relatively the same in length and they share a similar two act setting structure.<sup>3</sup>

Act	1 Sam 24	1 Sam 26
One:	<p><b>Sc. 1: Saul Pursues David</b>  <i>Ev. 1:</i> David goes to En-Gedi (v. 1)  <i>Ev. 2:</i> Saul returns from pursuing Philistines (v. 2)  <i>Ev. 3:</i> Saul hears David is in En-Gedi (v. 2)  <i>Ev. 4:</i> Saul takes 3000 men to seek after David (v. 3)</p> <p><b>Sc. 2: David Encounters Saul</b>  <i>Ev. 1:</i> Saul arrives at a cave by Sheep Pen of the Flock (v. 4)  <i>Ev. 2:</i> Saul enters cave to relieve himself (v. 4)  <i>Ev. 3:</i> David and his men are in same cave (v.</p>	<p><b>Sc. 1: Saul Pursues David</b></p> <p><i>Ev. 1:</i> Saul hears David is in the hill of Hachilah (v. 1)  <i>Ev. 2:</i> Saul takes 3000 men to seek after David (v. 2)</p> <p><b>Sc. 2: David Encounters Saul</b>  <i>Ev. 1:</i> Saul camps in the hill of Hachilah (v. 3)  <i>Ev. 2:</i> David and his men are in the same</p>

<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann (*Samuel*, 183) continues to voice the differences between the two chapters in order to conclude that the inclusion of both chapters in the narrative is not actually redundant.

<sup>2</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 274; Tsumura (*1 Samuel*, 563-564, 594) identifies Polzin's (*Deuteronomist*, 203-215) position that 1 Sam 24-26 acts as a transition for David from being the one who is endangered to becoming the one who chooses to spare life.

<sup>3</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 274; Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 166; Brueggemann (*Samuel*, 183) suggests that 1 Sam 24 and 26 are not exactly paralleled so that the latter chapter can serve as an intensification of the former; For an alternative outline that compares similarities and differences between these two chapters refer to Tsumura (*1 Samuel*, 595), Green ("1 Samuel 25," 3), Klein (*1 Samuel*, 236-237), and Robinson (*Like the Nations*, 127).

	<p>4);</p> <p>David's men encourage David to kill Saul (v. 5)</p> <p><i>Ev. 4:</i> David cuts hem from Saul's robe (v. 5)  <i>Ev. 5:</i> David's heart strikes him (v. 6)  <i>Ev. 6:</i> David refuses to strike YHWH's anointed (v. 7)  <i>Ev. 7:</i> David rebukes his men (v. 8)</p>	<p>wilderness; David sees that Saul had arrived (v. 3)  <i>Ev. 3:</i> David sent spies after Saul (v. 4)  <i>Ev. 4:</i> David goes to Saul's camp; he sees Saul and Abner sleeping (v. 5)  <i>Ev. 5:</i> David asks Ahimelech and Abishai, "Who will go down with me to Saul?" (v.6)  <i>Ev. 6:</i> David and Abishai go down to Saul's camp (v. 7)  <i>Ev. 7:</i> Abishai asks David for permission to kill Saul (v. 8)  <i>Ev. 8:</i> David rebukes Abishai, saying no one is to kill YHWH's anointed (v. 9)  <i>Ev. 9:</i> David predicts YHWH will strike Saul; David commands Abishai to take Saul's spear and water jug (v. 10-11)  <i>Ev. 10:</i> David takes Saul's spear and water jug (v. 12)</p>
Two:	<p><b>Sc. 1: Saul and David Meet</b>  <i>Ev. 1:</i> David goes out from cave (v. 9)  <i>Ev. 2:</i> David calls after Saul (v. 9)</p>	<p><b>Sc. 1: Saul and David Meet</b>  <i>Ev. 1:</i> David goes to the head of the mountain (v. 13)  <i>Ev. 2:</i> David calls after the people and Abner (v.</p>

	<p><i>Ev. 3:</i> Saul looks for David (v. 9)</p> <p><i>Ev. 4:</i> David prostrates himself before Saul (v. 9)</p> <p><i>Ev. 5:</i> David speaks to Saul (v. 10-16)</p> <p><i>Ev. 6:</i> Saul asks David if it is him (v. 17)</p> <p><i>Ev. 7:</i> Saul weeps (v. 17)</p> <p><i>Ev. 8:</i> Saul responds to David and concedes that David will be king (v. 18-22)</p> <p><i>Ev. 9:</i> David swears an oath to Saul that he will not cut off Saul's seed after him (v. 23)</p> <p><b>Sc. 2: Saul and David Part</b></p> <p><i>Ev. 1:</i> Saul goes to his house (v. 23)</p> <p><i>Ev. 2:</i> David and his men go up to the stronghold (v. 23)</p>	<p>14)</p> <p><i>Ev. 3:</i> Abner looks for David and asks him to identify himself (v. 14)</p> <p><i>Ev. 4:</i> David speaks to Abner (v. 15-16)</p> <p><i>Ev. 5:</i> Saul recognizes David's voice and asks David if it is him (v. 17)</p> <p><i>Ev. 6:</i> David affirms that it is him who is speaking (v. 17)</p> <p><i>Ev. 7:</i> David speaks to Saul (v. 18-20)</p> <p><i>Ev. 8:</i> Saul responds to David and concedes that he has sinned by pursuing David (v. 21)</p> <p><i>Ev. 9:</i> David responds to Saul (v. 22-24)</p> <p><i>Ev. 10:</i> Saul blesses David (v. 25)</p> <p><b>Sc. 2: Saul and David Part</b></p> <p><i>Ev. 1:</i> David goes on his road (v. 25)</p> <p><i>Ev. 2:</i> Saul returns to his place (v. 25)</p>
--	---	---

Although the setting structures of 1 Sam 24 and 26 are not absolutely identical, the many similarities between them cannot be missed.

The main dissimilarity between the two chapters is that they do not exhibit a true linear parallelism. Most obviously, Act Two, Scene Two is inverted in 1 Sam 26:25 from 1 Sam 24:23. A second glaring inversion occurs in Acts One of each chapter. In 1 Sam 24:7-8, Act One, Scene One, Events 6-7 are mirrored by Act One, Scene One, Event 8 in

1 Sam 26:9. Therefore, David's symbolic attack on Saul (1 Sam 24:5 and 26:12), which is the paralleled event in these two chapters, occurs *after* David's rebuke to his men in 1 Sam 24 but *before* his rebuke to Abishai in 1 Sam 26. This inversion interrupts the linear comparison and introduces a chiasm. This chiasm is an important literary construction and will be discussed in more detail below.

Second, in addition to a similar pattern of acts, scenes, and events, the temporal and spatial settings between these two chapters are also very comparable. The temporal pace in each chapter is strikingly the same. In both chapters the narrated time of Act One, Scene One (1 Sam 24:1-3 and 26:1-2) transpires very quickly, giving the narratee a quick sweeping panorama required to set up the chapter. Narrated time then slows down in Act One, Scene Two (1 Sam 24:4-8 and 26:3-12), almost to a 1:1 ratio between narrated time and narration time throughout. Finally, in Act Two, Scene One (1 Sam 24:9-23 and 26:13-25), dialogue dominates each chapter bringing narrated time into even step with narration time.<sup>4</sup> Act Two, Scene Two (1 Sam 24:23 and 26:25), by contrast reaccelerates narrated time in order to relocate Saul and David to their respective dwelling places.

Spatially, both chapters occur in the wilderness where David is living in exile.<sup>5</sup> Each chapter opens and closes with Saul in his territory and David in hiding. First Samuel 24 has David and his men hiding in the very cave Saul enters to relieve himself.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> There are some exceptions to this statement in 1 Sam 26. For example, narrated time moves quickly when David and Abishai go down to Saul's camp and when they return to the head of the mountain. The purpose in these accelerations is to focus the attention of the narratee on the dialogue that dominates Act Two, Scene One.

<sup>5</sup> Klein, *1 Samuel*, 257; Tsumura (*1 Samuel*, 595) notes, however, that in 1 Sam 24 David is in the wilderness of En-Gedi and in 1 Sam 26 David is in the wilderness of Ziph.

<sup>6</sup> Bodner (*1 Samuel*, 250) references Miscall (*1 Samuel*, 144): "In the symbolic lexicon of the narrative to this point, a 'cave' is highly appropriate spatial setting. As Peter Miscall reflects, 'At this point of the story, we can say that Saul's career has been marked by seeking and not finding or by seeking one thing and finding another. Here Saul finally finds David, but the outcome of the encounter is not what he sought.'"

Similarly, in 1 Sam 26 Saul and his men camp at the very hill where David and his men are hiding. It might be suggested that the spatial setting of 1 Sam 26 is merely a larger stage than the cave in 1 Sam 24. Whereas Saul entered the cave alone in the earlier chapter, in 1 Sam 26 he enters “the cave” with all 3000 of his men. The parallels are strengthened by noticing that the latter chapter transpires at night. The darkness of the cave is maintained by the darkness of the night in Saul’s camp.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, both chapters contain a scene (Act Two, Scene One) where Saul and David participate in a very public, yet transparent, conversation. The narratee can imagine all 600 of David’s men and 3000 of Saul’s men listening in on the honest discourse occurring between the two leaders.

Third, as already subtly indicated by the comparison between each setting structure, these two chapters share common plots. The plot structure for 1 Sam 24 is as follows: (1) The exposition introduces Saul at his home and David in exile (1 Sam 24:1); (2) Action begins when Saul hears a report about David’s whereabouts (1 Sam 24:1); (3) The occasioning incident that generates conflict in the story occurs when Saul leaves his home with 3000 of his men to pursue David in the wilderness (1 Sam 24:2); (4) The conflict escalates as Saul stops to relieve himself in the very cave where David and his men are hiding (1 Sam 24:3) and David is exhorted to strike Saul dead (1 Sam 24:4);<sup>8</sup> (5) The climax is most intense when David symbolically attacks Saul by cutting the hem of Saul’s robe (1 Sam 24:4) and then rebukes his men for suggesting he raise his hand against YHWH’s anointed (1 Sam 24:5-6); (6) The climax begins to be resolved when

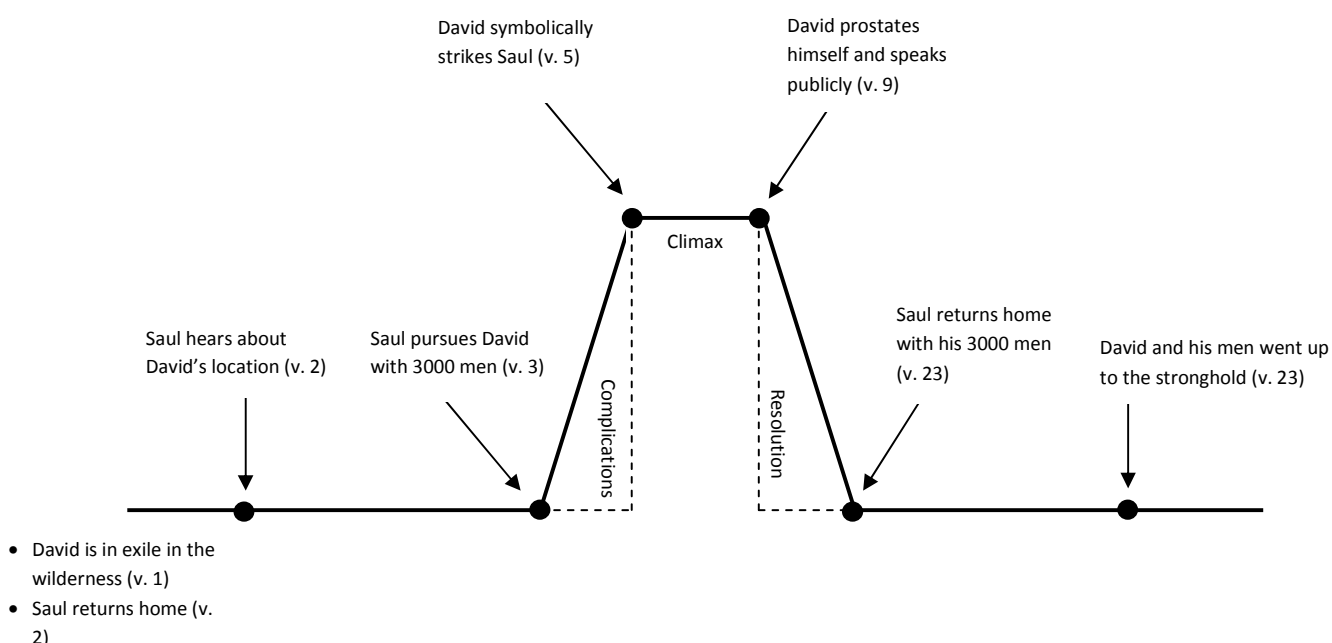
---

<sup>7</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 278.

<sup>8</sup> In both instances the exhorters appeal to YHWH to justify their motive: Alter, *David Story*, 164; Bodner (*1 Samuel*, 276-277) notes that in 1 Sam 24 David’s men provide an alleged divine quotation and in 1 Sam 26 Abishai does not quote YHWH. Nevertheless, in both chapters David’s men appeal to God as having provided an opportunity to strike Saul; Tsumura, *1 Samuel*, 600; Klein, *1 Samuel*, 257.

David prostrates himself before Saul and launches into an impassioned public oration (1 Sam 24:8-15); (7) The conflict deflates as Saul acknowledges David's clemency and declares that David will be exalted (1 Sam 24:16-21); (8) A point of final resolution is accomplished when Saul and his men return home (1 Sam 24:22); (9) Action ends as Saul and David arrive at their respective dwellings (1 Sam 24:22).

The plot structure of 1 Sam 24, therefore, can be sketched as follows:



The plot structure for 1 Sam 26 is similar: (1) The exposition introduces Saul at Gibeah (1 Sam 26:1); (2) Action begins when Saul hears a report about David's whereabouts (1 Sam 26:1); (3) The occasioning incident that generates conflict in the story occurs when Saul leaves his home with 3000 of his men to pursue David in the wilderness (1 Sam 26:2); (4) The conflict escalates as David sends spies to observe Saul's location (1 Sam 26:3-4) and then goes to Saul's camp himself (1 Sam 26:5). Dramatic tension continues to rise when David recruits Abishai to go down to the camp with him (1 Sam 26:6-7). Abishai then exhorts David to permit him to run Saul through with his own

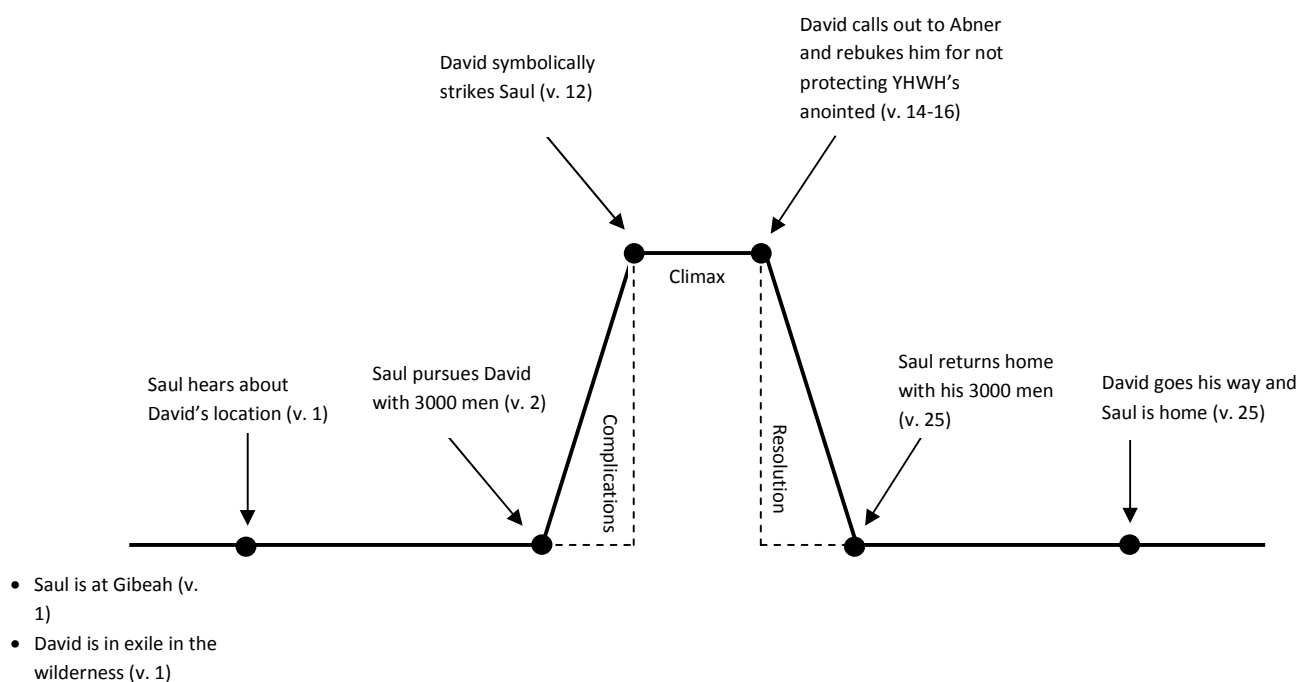
spear (1 Sam 26:8).<sup>9</sup> David rebukes Abishai by instructing him never to raise his hand against YHWH's anointed and then instructs him to steal Saul's spear and water jug instead (1 Sam 26:9-11); (5) The climax is most intense when David – not Abishai – symbolically attacks Saul by stealing his spear and water jug (1 Sam 26:12);<sup>10</sup> (6) The climax begins to be resolved when David goes to the top of the opposite hill and calls out to Abner, accusing him of not adequately protecting the king (1 Sam 26:13-16); (7) The conflict deflates as David pleads his innocence and Saul acknowledges his own sin (1 Sam 26:17-24); (8) A point of final resolution is accomplished when Saul blesses David as he and his men return home (1 Sam 26:25); (9) Action ends with Saul and David once again in their respective dwellings (1 Sam 26:25).

The plot structure of 1 Sam 26, therefore, can be sketched as follows:

---

<sup>9</sup> In both instances the exhorters appeal to YHWH to justify their motive: Alter, *David Story*, 164; Bodner (*I Samuel*, 276-277) notes that in 1 Sam 24 David's men provide an alleged divine quotation and in 1 Sam 26 Abishai does not quote YHWH. Nevertheless, in both chapters David's men appeal to God as having provided an opportunity to strike Saul; Tsumura, *I Samuel*, 600; Klein, *I Samuel*, 257; Hertzberg (*I & II Samuel*, 209) recognizes that Abishai's insistence acts as a mirror to David's men in the cave in 1 Sam 24.

<sup>10</sup> Bodner (*I Samuel*, 278) writes: "Because David takes the spear and jug, there is a nice symmetry with chap. 24, as once more David creeps up to Saul in the darkness."



As these diagrams illustrate, the plots of these two chapters are remarkably similar to one another.<sup>11</sup> Although the details of each chapter are different, these respective details can be added to this basic plot structure easily. As previously mentioned the greatest difference between these plot structures is the inversion of events that serve to transition the story from one point in the plot graph to another. For example, in 1 Sam 24:8 David rebukes his men after the climactic moment when he cuts the hem from Saul's robe (1 Sam 24:5). By contrast, David rebukes Abishai in 1 Sam 26:9-11 before the climactic moment when he steals Saul's spear and water jug (1 Sam 26:12). Whereas David's rebuke in 1 Sam 24 is a part of the climax, in 1 Sam 26 David's rebuke contributes to the escalation of tension before the climax. This chiasmic structure is a deliberate narrative technique and will be analyzed further in the next section of this paper.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 181; Green, "1 Samuel 25," 4.

Both 1 Sam 24 and 26 are concentric plots. In spite of Saul's remarkable admissions, at the beginning and end of each chapter Saul is at home and David remains in exile. While the situation seems unaffected, both David and Saul are changed by their experience with one another.<sup>12</sup> David has effectively challenged Saul's honour, stripping him of all self-respect in the presence of 3000 of his men.<sup>13</sup> Entirely shamed by David, Saul has all but abdicated the throne by recognizing the divine plan that is protecting David and will ensure his rise to power. The public exchanges between Saul and David have, therefore, proven to be a public relations dream for David, as popular opinion among the troops is probably swayed by the oratory skills of David and the self-admitted bungling of the reigning king.

Fourth and finally, although there are more personages in 1 Sam 26, the characters featured in both chapters are comparable. The most obvious examples of this are Saul and David, who are the two main characters in both chapters. Saul is characterized in much the same way by both chapters. In his rabid pursuit of David, Saul is naïve of David's presence even though he is told at the outset where David is. Saul's ignorance is amplified for the narratee by the coupling of a dark spatial setting with Saul's extreme vulnerability. In 1 Sam 24, Saul is relieving himself in a dark cave and in 1 Sam 26 Saul is sleeping in a dark camp. In each instance unbeknownst to Saul, David is lurking in the shadows with the opportunity – and ample encouragement – to kill.

In contrast, David, who is supposedly the one being hunted, is presented as the hunter in each chapter.<sup>14</sup> In 1 Sam 24 David has a serendipitous advantage over Saul in

---

<sup>12</sup> Green, "1 Samuel 25," 4.

<sup>13</sup> Kirkpatrick ("Honor," 21-24) has succinctly presented the model for understanding honour and shame as it relates to Hebrew narrative.

<sup>14</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 253; Brueggemann (*Samuel*, 182) notices this reversal in 1 Sam 26.

the cave and in 1 Sam 26 he has a similar edge in Saul's camp. Both times David refuses to raise his hand against YHWH's anointed.<sup>15</sup>

The dynamic of Saul's ignorant vulnerability and David's sly mastery of the situation is accentuated through their discourse in each chapter. David publicly pleads his innocence by producing evidence (the hem of Saul's robe in 1 Sam 24 and Saul's spear and water jug in 1 Sam 26) that he forewent his opportunity to slay the unsuspecting king.<sup>16</sup> As Baldwin reflects:

Holding in his hand a piece of Saul's robe, David brought home to Saul how close he had been to losing his life. If David had really wanted to kill Saul, he would certainly have done so in the cave... Having now proved his innocence beyond doubt, David points out to Saul that, in seeking to kill him, Saul is the one who is in the wrong.<sup>17</sup>

In response Saul admits his blame and exalts David in the presence of all their men. The result of both chapters is that Saul is shamed and David is accredited the king's honour.<sup>18</sup>

As mentioned, there are more individual characters in 1 Sam 26 than in 1 Sam 24. Abner acts as an extension of Saul and Abishai as an extension of David. Abner's correlation with Saul can be easily seen in the setting structure comparison made above. Whereas David calls after Saul in 1 Sam 24:9, in 1 Sam 26:14 David calls after Abner. In 1 Sam 24:9 Saul looks for David and in 1 Sam 26:14 it is Abner who is looking for David. In 1 Sam 24:10-16 David launches into his speech by addressing Saul, but in 1 Sam 26:15-16 David initiates his speech by addressing Abner. These comparisons tie Abner to Saul in order to accentuate character traits in the failing king. Abner's lack of

---

<sup>15</sup> Polzin (*Deuteronomist*, 206) suggests that David's two time mercy to Saul is mirrored by his mercy to Nabal, thus connecting Nabal and Saul.

<sup>16</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 254; Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 168; Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 179; Tsumura, *1 Samuel*, 566, 570.

<sup>17</sup> Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 145.

<sup>18</sup> Kirkpatrick ("Honor," 21-24) has succinctly presented the model for understanding honour and shame as it relates to Hebrew narrative.

knowledge and extreme vulnerability is mirrored by Saul, who is equally unprepared to meet David. Introducing Abner, therefore, draws additional attention to Saul's folly. Not only is Saul characterized as a foolish king on a fool's errand, but Abner, his second-in-command, is in no better position to help the flailing monarch. In the same way, Abishai's rash impulse to kill Saul while he sleeps mirrors David's innate desire to see Saul dead.<sup>19</sup>

The perceptible similarities in the setting structures, the temporal and spatial settings, the plot structures and plot types, and the characterizations made in each chapter all work together to defend the hypothesis that the narrator intended 1 Sam 24 and 26 to be considered in conversation with one another.

Therefore, 1 Sam 24 and 26 create a balanced and noticeable envelope structure around 1 Sam 25, which seems irregular and disjunctive in comparison.<sup>20</sup> Even the syntax at the outset of 1 Sam 25 seems to indicate a lateral move in the narration as opposed to the expected forward unfolding of the story.<sup>21</sup> However, while this middle chapter appears to be dissimilar to the chapters that surround it, there are several elements that tie 1 Sam 25 into 1 Sam 24-26.<sup>22</sup> As Bodner writes:

By means of the thematic links with chap. 24 (and chap. 26, as we will have occasion to see), we are provided with a new lens that opens our eyes to nuances of the story that we may otherwise have missed. Consequently this chapter (1 Sam 25)

---

<sup>19</sup> Bodner (*1 Samuel*, 276) cites Ackerman ("Abishai," 14): "Moreover, in view of the larger portrait of Abishai that eventually emerges from the narrative, James Ackerman reflects: 'More than any other character Abishai is depicted as David's alter-ego, the consistent voice of his dark side, who advocates use of violence to advance David's honour and self-interest.'"

<sup>20</sup> Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 187; Green, "1 Samuel 25," 1.

<sup>21</sup> Green, "1 Samuel 25," 4.

<sup>22</sup> Evans (*1 & 2 Samuel*, 112) writes: "Sandwiched between the two parallel incidents in which David has the opportunity to destroy Saul but chooses to spare his life is this very different account of David's activities during this period. At first sight it appears out of place in the overall schema of the books of Samuel, where the focus is on the question of power, primarily in national leadership. But here too power is a key motif, and there are several reasons the writers might consider this incident to be relevant."

becomes an important one for both the overall storyline and the unfolding characterizations of both Saul and David.<sup>23</sup>

As Bodner here suggests, it is erroneous to conclude that 1 Sam 25 is out of place between its bordering chapters. Green also states: “The reverie of ch. 25 provides a sideshadow of the action in its two framing episodes, rehearses representationally and bluntly what almost happens but which must ultimately be avoided.”<sup>24</sup>

The most obvious points of connection are as follows: First, the focus of the temporal setting in all three chapters is each a single day. Second, the spatial setting in all three chapters orbits around the wilderness of David’s exile. Third, the plot of each chapter focuses on David’s dilemma over whether to exercise restraint or unleash violence.<sup>25</sup> Fourth, each chapter describes David interacting with a foe (Saul in 1 Sam 24/26 and Nabal in 1 Sam 25) Fifth, the climax of each plot is most intense when David symbolically attacks his rival Saul and Nabal. Sixth, the climax of each plot deflates with David’s decision to exercise restraint instead of violence.<sup>26</sup> Seventh, David is the main character in all three chapters. Eighth, in all three chapters David, the “hunted,” becomes the “hunter.” These eight main similarities buttress the cohesion of 1 Sam 24-26 in spite of the apparent incongruities present.

These observations suggest that the placement of 1 Sam 25 is not coincidental. Rather the narrator deliberately located it between two matching chapters with a particular purpose in mind. Given that David features as the dominant personality in all

---

<sup>23</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 258.

<sup>24</sup> Green, “1 Samuel 25,” 1; Bodner (*1 Samuel*, 274) references Jobling (*1 Samuel*, 92): “David Jobling argues that chap. 25 ‘stands in an allegorical relation’ to chaps. 24 and 26, and I will be alert to such nuances in my analysis below.”

<sup>25</sup> Tsumura, *1 Samuel*, 575.

<sup>26</sup> Tsumura, *1 Samuel*, 575.

three chapters, the purpose of 1 Sam 25 within 1 Sam 24-26 hinges on the characterization of David.

The seeming contrasts exhibited in David's character between 1 Sam 24/26 and 1 Sam 25 provide an apt starting point for considering the narrative purpose of this middle chapter. On the surface it appears to the narratee as though David is restrained and composed in 1 Sam 24/26 and that he is violent and impulsive in 1 Sam 25.<sup>27</sup> What appears at first to be contrast, however, is not actually contrast but is rather *narrative commentary*.<sup>28</sup> Baldwin suggests that 1 Sam 25 serves as a narrative analogy to help the narratee better understand 1 Sam 24 and 26. She quotes Gordon to describe narrative analogy:

[Narrative analogy is] a device whereby the narrator can provide an internal commentary on the action which he is describing, usually by means of cross-reference to an earlier action or speech. Thus narratives are made to interact in ways which may not be immediately apparent; ironic parallelism abounds wherever this technique is applied.<sup>29</sup>

Accordingly, by employing this narrative strategy the narrator is able to covertly comment on the characterization of David in 1 Sam 24/26 through an intricate series of ironic parallelisms.

Without 1 Sam 25, it would be much more difficult for the narratee to detect the darker characterization of David that lurks beneath the surface in 1 Sam 24/26. The narrator presents David covertly in these chapters so that the narratee is able to observe David from a limited perspective in 1 Sam 24/26. In 1 Sam 25, on the other hand, the narrator pulls back the curtain and invites the narratee to glimpse a David not yet seen

---

<sup>27</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 252; Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 174-175.

<sup>28</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 258.

<sup>29</sup> Baldwin (*1 & 2 Samuel*, 147) quoting Gordon ("David's Rise," 42-43); also: Long, "Literary Artistry," 40.

clearly in the story. Through dramatic narration the narratee learns that David is capable of revenge and murder. The outward actions of David in 1 Sam 25 betray an inner David that is well hidden in 1 Sam 24/26. This inner David is not unique to 1 Sam 25, but rather he is normative throughout 1 Sam 24-26. This is true even though the “David” clearly presented in 1 Sam 25 remains largely hidden in the bracketing chapters. The result is a brilliant multifaceted presentation of David. The task of the narratee is to synthesize what seems to be contradictory in order to fully comprehend David as he is portrayed by the narrator.

To summarize this first section, 1 Sam 24-26 is a coherent and unified literary unit. The conspicuous similarities between 1 Sam 24 and 26 strongly suggest that the narrator intended these two chapters to be read in light of each other. Furthermore, since these two chapters surround 1 Sam 25, this middle chapter must also be read in light of the chapters before and after it. A surface reading seems to indicate that 1 Sam 25 is unrelated to 1 Sam 24 and 26. A closer reading, however, makes obvious the many aspects of the chapter that tie it to the larger literary unit and these correlations are important indicators about how the narratee ought to understand David’s characterization.

### *David’s Alter-Egos*

The interaction of David with secondary characters in each of the three chapters must be carefully considered in order to discover the narrator’s crafty characterization of David throughout. In 1 Sam 24 and 26 David restrains himself from striking Saul in spite of the exhortations to kill from his men. In 1 Sam 25 the inverse occurs, as David girds

his sword for battle against Nabal – Saul’s rhetorical stand-in – only to be restrained by Abigail.<sup>30</sup>

The theme of Davidic restraint is carefully presented throughout 1 Sam 24-26. To accentuate the importance of this theme the narrator has deliberately structured the narrative with it in mind. The narratee is invited to notice an interesting chiasm that is delicately built into the background of these chapters:

A: David’s men suggest YHWH has delivered Saul into his hand (1 Sam 24:5).

B: David cuts the hem of Saul’s robe (1 Sam 24:5).

C: David rebukes his men for suggesting he should strike “YHWH’s anointed” (1 Sam 24:7-8).<sup>31</sup>

D: David girds his sword, swearing an oath in the name of God that he will destroy Nabal and his house (1 Sam 25:13, 22).

**KEYSTONE: Abigail restrains David (1 Sam 25:24-31).**<sup>32</sup>

D’: David blesses YHWH and Abigail for protecting him from incurring bloodguilt and, sheathing his sword, he repeats his oath (1 Sam 25:32-34).

C’: David rebukes Abishai for wanting to strike “YHWH’s anointed” (1 Sam 26:8-9).

B’: David takes Saul’s spear and water jug (1 Sam 26:12).

A’: David suggests that YHWH has delivered Saul into his hand (1 Sam 26:23).

At the centre of this chiasm is Abigail’s intervention. Rhetorically, therefore, she shoulders a tremendous responsibility in restraining David from incurring bloodguilt.

<sup>30</sup> For more about the Saul and Nabal connection, see: Brown, *Discovering David*, 123-132.

<sup>31</sup> Many commentators, including Klein (*1 Samuel*, 238), Robinson (*Like the Nations*, 128), and Tsumura (*1 Samuel*, 566), suggest that B and C seem to be out of order. To remedy this problem redaction theories abound. A better reason for this order, as presented in the MT, is the existence of a subtle chiasm weaved throughout the three chapters so that the fulcrum moment rests on Abigail’s intervention.

<sup>32</sup> Dorsey (*Literary Structure*, 132) places Abigail’s intervention as the central point of a much broader chiasm that spans 1 Sam 21-31.

Abigail's intervention is the narrative centre of 1 Sam 24-26 for a number of reasons. First, Abigail's speech to David occupies the actual middle of this literary unit. In the BHS MT there are 805 words before and 860 words after she begins speaking. The beginning of her appeal to David, therefore, marks a literary centre to these three chapters.

Second, as the keystone of this delicate chiasmic structure Abigail's intervention marks the rhetorical fulcrum of 1 Sam 24-26. Abigail articulates the major dilemma that is before David in each of these chapters; David must decide whether to kill or not to kill. Abigail is firmly entrenched on the latter side of this dilemma, not to kill, and she effectively persuades David to this effect. As will be discussed, this dilemma is also addressed by David's men in the chapters before and after. Their advice to David runs counter to Abigail's counsel but is not heeded by David.<sup>33</sup> Abigail's rhetorical presence, therefore, is felt in 1 Sam 24 and 26 although she is not mentioned by name.

Third, in both instances David's rationale for not killing Saul is remarkably similar to Abigail's defense against Nabal's slaughter.<sup>34</sup> David refuses to lift his hand to kill YHWH's anointed. Why? Put simply, to kill Saul would cause David to incur bloodguilt, thus sully his awaited ascension to the throne.<sup>35</sup> Of course, there is also a practical consideration in David's mind. Since he too is YHWH's anointed it is a good policy to practice, teach, and reinforce the sacred nature of the royal office.

With this chiasm in mind, let us consider the role of David's men and Abigail as two opposing alter-egos for David, each seeking to appeal to a quality in David's character.

---

<sup>33</sup> Tsumura, *1 Samuel*, 575.

<sup>34</sup> Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 151.

<sup>35</sup> Tsumura, *1 Samuel*, 567.

In 1 Sam 24:5, David's men urge him to kill Saul by saying: "Behold, the day which YHWH said to you, 'Behold, I am giving your enemy into your hand and you shall do to him according to that which is good in your eyes.'"<sup>36</sup> David then approaches Saul in silence and cuts the hem of his robe, but does not kill him. Likewise, in 1 Sam 26:8 Abishai asks David for permission to murder Saul while he sleeps: "God delivered – today – your enemy into your hand and now may I strike him please with the spear and the ground with one stroke; and I will not repeat a second time for him." David then rebukes Abishai and instructs him to retrieve Saul's water jug and spear, before having second thoughts and deciding to take these items himself (1 Sam 26:9-12). In both instances David demonstrates remarkable restraint given his situation and the opportunity presented.

It may be, however, that David's men in 1 Sam 24 – and Abishai in 1 Sam 26 – reflect a quality within David's character that remains in check, but is nevertheless present. As a manifestation of David's *unrestrained alter-ego*, these men give voice to the side of David that would relish the death of Saul and the initiation of his own rise to power. An affinity between David and his men in 1 Sam 24 is established by the very chiasm outlined above. Notice that A is balanced by A'. In A (1 Sam 24:5), it is David's men who suggest to David that YHWH delivered Saul into his hands. In A' (1 Sam 26:23), it is David himself who makes this claim directly to Saul. In 1 Sam 26:8 Abishai also proposes that God had delivered Saul into David's hands. On this point, therefore, these three groups – David's men, Abishai, and David – all seem to agree. Rhetorically, therefore, it is conceivable that an aspect of David's character is reflected by the instincts

---

<sup>36</sup> McCarter (*I Samuel*, 383) reminds us that no such promise from YHWH has been previously mentioned in the narrative.

of his men. This is especially poignant in 1 Sam 26, where Abishai's immediate proclivity to kill Saul may reflect David's intrinsic yearning.<sup>37</sup>

If this is the case, however, then what restrains David from making it so? What prevents David from taking the throne of Israel by force? Herein lays the crux of the dilemma concerning the characterization of David and the main rhetorical function of 1 Sam 25. The appeal of David's men is overpowered by a stronger more central voice. The voice of Abigail petitions David's opposite ego with words of political wisdom strong enough to pacify his regicidal inclinations. The might of Abigail's intervention is reinforced by its keystone placement in the chiasm that ties these three chapters together. Whereas David's men speak in the periphery of the rhetorical structure, Abigail's voice is central.

Abigail successfully persuades David to refrain from striking Nabal and his house in order to avoid incurring bloodguilt (1 Sam 25:24-31).<sup>38</sup> As previously noted, Abigail's intervention reverberates across the entire literary unit of 1 Sam 24-26:

David's avoidance of bloodguilt is the key issue in the narrative, just as it is in his relationship with Saul during the whole of his fugitive days. The sparing or killing of Nabal therefore has its symbolic aspect, in that David, consciously or otherwise, is even now laying the foundation of his future rule.<sup>39</sup>

Since the avoidance of bloodguilt is of such high importance to all three chapters, Abigail must be seriously considered as a central figure for understanding this theme as it relates to David's deliberations.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Bodner (*I Samuel*, 276) cites Ackerman ("Abishai," 14).

<sup>38</sup> Polzin (*Deuteronomist*, 208) argues that Abigail prevents David "from killing that Saul figure."; Whitelam, "Defense of David," 73.

<sup>39</sup> Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 185.

<sup>40</sup> Brueggemann (*Samuel*, 184) acknowledges the connection between 1 Sam 24 and 1 Sam 26: "David has spent the long chapter 25 avoiding bloodguilt against Nabal. How much more will he avoid it with Saul, the anointed!"; Gordon ("David's Rise," 43) recognizes the thematic link that David refrains from incurring bloodguilt as a common thread throughout 1 Sam 24-26.

In 1 Sam 25 Abigail typifies the *restrained David* portrayed in 1 Sam 24 and 26, thus enabling the narratee to see the *unrestrained David* with greater clarity. As Green writes: “The prominence of pursuit, especially in ch. 25, makes more obvious the more subtle dance enclosing it, shows more boldly the unthinkable: the slaying of the reigning king, especially by his successor.”<sup>41</sup> David’s affinity with his men in 1 Sam 24 and 26 would be much more difficult to discern if it were not for David’s interaction with Abigail in 1 Sam 25. In this middle chapter the narratee is invited to see a David that matches the murderous ranting of his men. David is girded for battle and prepared to offensively strike a fatal blow against Nabal, who is clearly meant to represent Saul.<sup>42</sup> Although Abigail’s intervention only directly prevents David from killing Nabal and his house, her place in the narrative structure suggests that she embodies Davidic restraint throughout 1 Sam 24-26. David’s mercy toward Nabal, therefore, is paralleled by his mercy to Saul.<sup>43</sup> Whereas David finds the resolve within himself to restrain from violence in 1 Sam 24 and 26, in 1 Sam 25 Abigail is required to externally remind David of this inner-quality in his character.<sup>44</sup>

Just as David is linked to his men by their threefold individual assertions that YHWH delivered Saul into David’s hands, so too is David rhetorically linked with Abigail. The phrase, “*until the light of the morning*” (עד־אור הַבֶּקֶר), is recycled in

---

<sup>41</sup> Green, “1 Samuel 25,” 5.

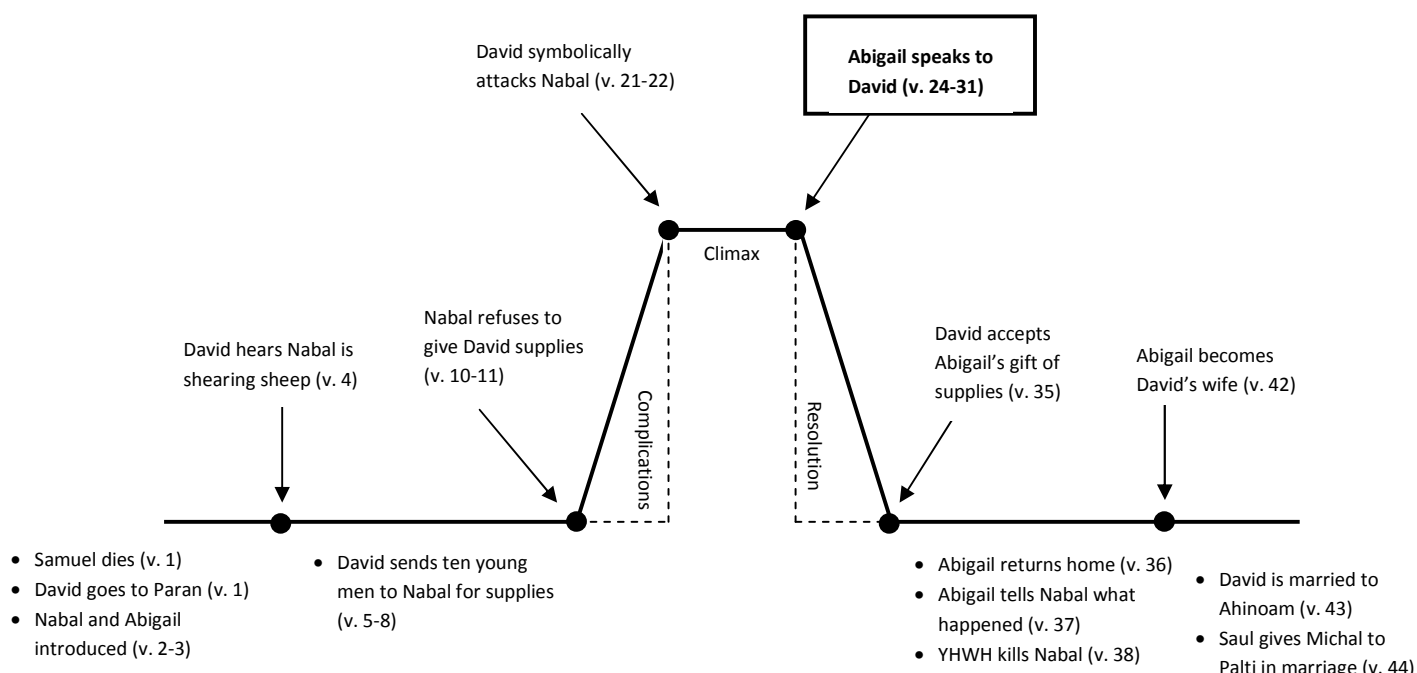
<sup>42</sup> Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 147; Brown (“Discovering David,” 124) writes: “This Nabal-Saul connection is essential because, by identifying it, the narratee is able to apply David’s reaction against Nabal to the below-the-surface dynamic being played out between David and Saul. Put simply, the way David feels and acts toward Nabal is precisely how he feels and *wants to act* toward Saul.”; Biddle (“1 Samuel 25,” 623-626) compares Nabal and Laban, Laban and Saul, and therefore Nabal and Saul; Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 258; Evans, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 113; Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 181; Gordon, “David’s Rise,” 43; Polzin, *Deuteronomist*, 210-211; Whitlam, “Defence of David,” 76;

<sup>43</sup> Polzin (*Deuteronomist*, 210-211) writes: “Nabal is obviously related to the Saul of chapters 24 and 26 insofar as he is a similar object of mercy: David chooses not to kill the man who has returned evil for good.”

<sup>44</sup> Tsumura, *1 Samuel*, 575-576.

Abigail's consciousness (1 Sam 25:36) although previously it was a part of David's verbal response to her (1 Sam 25:34). Bodner asserts that this repetition is an intentional narrative strategy to demonstrate the solidarity between Abigail and David.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, in addition to the many thematic links between David and Abigail, the narrator has also hinted at their inter-connectedness by the repetition of this phrase.

There is a second way in which David and Abigail are linked rhetorically. In 1 Sam 24 and 26 the climax begins to subside when David begins a long and impassioned speech to Saul and Abner, respectively. In 1 Sam 25 Abigail occupies this place in the plot, disarming David with her wise council:



<sup>45</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 270.

Abigail rhetorically acts as David's *restrained alter-ego* to counter the *unrestrained alter-ego* personified by David's men in 1 Sam 24 and 26.<sup>46</sup> The narrator achieves the near equivalent of Christopher Marlowe's graphic image of an angel whispering in one ear of Doctor Faustus and a demon whispering in the other.<sup>47</sup> On one of David's shoulders are his men, who appeal to his desire to see Saul dead. On his other shoulder is Abigail, who appeals to David's shrewd political sensitivities. Although both David's men and Abigail illuminate a facet of his character, David is presented with a series of situations that force him to choose to exercise one or the other. Although David chooses to employ the equivalent of Abigail's counsel in each circumstance, the character qualities that resonate with his men are nevertheless internally present.<sup>48</sup> David's behavior in 1 Sam 25 ensures the narratee of this.

Intriguing conclusions are therefore drawn when David's alter-egos are brought into conversation with one another. The "David" conspicuous to the narratee in 1 Sam 25 is equaled by his men in 1 Sam 24 and Abishai in 1 Sam 26. In each chapter, therefore, there is an agent of unrestraint, with David himself acting as this agent in the middle chapter. In simple terms, as regards unrestraint, the three chapters form a chiasm:

---

<sup>46</sup> Green ("1 Samuel 25," 14) suggests a different parallel here. She presents that Abigail is representative of Jonathan since both work against their respective houses for David's benefit; In order to fully grasp Abigail's role as David's alter-ego, the narratee is required to see the narrator's purpose "below the surface" of the narrative. Green ("1 Samuel 25," 6) suggests that 1 Sam 25 is allegorical or parabolic in genre: "There is a discernible shift in characterization in ch. 25, occasionally noted in commentary though without adequate explanation. The tone becomes more allegorical than in the surrounding frame. The three main characters are made more didactic than usual as they execute their dance of tacit collusion. In this instance, I suggest that the 'parable' genre assumes the particular features of a dream or reverie, a claim resting on several factors." Although I am not making that exact claim, the characterization of Abigail as David's alter-ego does share some qualities in common with Green's assessment of genre.

<sup>47</sup> Marlowe, *Faustus*: Unlike Marlow, the narrator of 1 Sam 24-26 does not proffer David's character a choice between good and evil, but rather two alternative forms of moral failure.

<sup>48</sup> Hertzberg (*I & II Samuel*, 196) acknowledges the internal struggle likely happening within David, but he acknowledges that this is not clear by the narration of 1 Sam 24.

A: David's men act unrestrained (1 Sam 24).

**KEYSTONE: David acts unrestrained (1 Sam 25).**

A': David's man (Abishai) acts unrestrained (1 Sam 26).

Since David's men in 1 Sam 24 and 26 reflect David's character in 1 Sam 25, it seems accurate to suggest that they rhetorically serve as David's alter-ego in the outside chapters.

At the same time, the "David" conspicuous to the narratee in 1 Sam 24 and 26 is mirrored in 1 Sam 25 by Abigail. In each chapter, therefore, there is an agent of restraint, with David acting as this agent in the outside chapters. Like above, therefore, the three chapters form a mirror-image chiasm around the theme of restraint:

A: David promotes restraint (1 Sam 24).

**KEYSTONE: Abigail promotes restraint (1 Sam 25).**

A': David promotes restraint (1 Sam 26).

Just as David's men are considered to be David's alter-ego in 1 Sam 24 and 26, so Abigail is David's alter-ego in 1 Sam 25.

The result of the presence of these two alter-egos is a confounded construction of David's character that can most aptly be illustrated by a merging of the two chiasms above:

A: David's men act unrestrained but are restrained by David (1 Sam 24).

**KEYSTONE: David acts unrestrained but is restrained by Abigail (1 Sam 25).**

A': David's man (Abishai) acts unrestrained but is restrained by David (1 Sam 26).

According to this analysis, and in keeping with the conclusions about David's opposing alter-egos, David emerges as a man who is both the restrainer and the restrained. As David's men are (in 1 Sam 24 and 26), so David is (in 1 Sam 25), and as Abigail is (in 1 Sam 25), so David is (in 1 Sam 24 and 26). For the purpose of rhetorical analysis, if "David" is substituted for his alter-ego in each chapter, the chiasm then delivers an astounding observation:

A: "David" acts unrestrained but is restrained by David (1 Sam 24).

**KEYSTONE: David acts unrestrained but is restrained by "David" (1 Sam 25)**

A': "David" acts unrestrained but is restrained by David (1 Sam 26).

Therefore, by constructing the literary unit of 1 Sam 24-26 in such a way, the narrator has achieved a masterful and complex portrayal of David's character. David is divided against himself, encouraged in opposite directions by external alter-egos, and consistently characterized throughout each of the three chapters. In each chapter Davidic restraint wins the inner-contest. The difference between 1 Sam 25 and 1 Sam 24/26 is the scope and perspective from which the narrator illustrates David through his alter-egos.

In summary, the main theme in 1 Sam 24-26 is Davidic restraint. David spares Saul in 1 Sam 24 and 26, and he spares Nabal in 1 Sam 25. In 1 Sam 24 and 26 David summons restraint in spite of the advice and encouragement of his men. In 1 Sam 25, David is prepared to strike until he is restrained by Abigail. The subtle yet masterful chiasm that unites all three chapters accentuates the pivotal role Abigail plays in helping the narratee more fully understand the inner crisis present in David's character throughout.

*Discovering David: The Narrator's Ideological Point of View*

Thus far, this paper has demonstrated that 1 Sam 24-26 is best considered as a coherent literary unit and that the middle chapter is pivotal in understanding the whole, especially as it pertains to the characterization of David. Once the unity of these three chapters had been established we were able to identify ironic parallels between characters in 1 Sam 25 and 1 Sam 24/26. We focused especially on the role of David's men and Abigail as opposite alter-egos for David's character.

The result of all this effort has been that David emerges as a character that seems restrained in some instances and unrestrained in others. He seems restrained in relation to Saul and not restrained in relation to Nabal. He mirrors the unrestraint of his men in 1 Sam 25 and reflects the restraint natural to Abigail in 1 Sam 24 and 26. David, therefore, seems contradictory and confounded.

From these observations, the narratee must make a judgment about the narrator's ideological point of view, which has the potential to go in two distinct directions. On the one hand, the narratee might suggest that in 1 Sam 24 and 26 David overcomes his inner-demons, which are so thoroughly presented in 1 Sam 25. There are two contradictory observations, however, which make this option unappealing to the narratee.

In 1 Sam 24:6 the narratee learns that David internally acknowledges the depravity of his symbolic attack on Saul: "Then it was after this that the heart of David struck him because he had cut the hem which [belonged] to Saul." On the surface, David's tweaked conscience seems to suggest a moral victory. However, the incongruity of David's continued action suggests otherwise.

David presents the hem of Saul's robe (1 Sam 24:12) as evidence of his innocence and moral purity. To adopt the position that David has resisted the immoral temptations that are so conspicuous in 1 Sam 25, therefore, the narratee must make sense of why David's heart struck him. If the cutting of Saul's robe is an innocent act, void of the immorality showcased in 1 Sam 25, David's heart would have no reason to strike him. If, on the other hand, the cutting of Saul's robe is an immoral act, David's heart rightfully strikes him. Therefore, since David's heart *did* strike him, the narratee recognizes that the cutting of Saul's robe is itself an immoral act, at least in the mind of David's character. By inference, therefore, the parallel episode of David stealing Saul's water jug and spear (1 Sam 26:12) is equally corrupt.

The moral victory David publicly claims in 1 Sam 24 and 26 implodes on itself upon serious scrutiny. So too, the argument that David conquers his immoral tendencies fails to adequately capture the narrator's ideological point of view pertaining to David's characterization in 1 Sam 24-26. In 1 Sam 24:6 David may momentarily feel conscience-stricken about his action against Saul. Nevertheless, David uses this morally bankrupt act in his political favour as an argument for his innocence, effectively compounding the immorality of the act itself by using it for the public shaming of Saul.<sup>49</sup> There is no repentance in David's propaganda, but rather he uses his own immorality to further his political interests. Furthermore, David repeats this pattern in 1 Sam 26 with no mention by the narrator of a troubled conscience, which actually suggests a deterioration of David's moral fibre.

---

<sup>49</sup> Kirkpatrick ("Honor," 21-24) outlines the model of shame and honour operating here. More will be said about this in the proceeding sections.

Accordingly, the narratee is invited to consider an alternative reading of these chapters that suggests that in spite of his restraint in 1 Sam 24 and 26 David does not overcome the obvious immorality showcased in 1 Sam 25. There is more rhetorical evidence in these three chapters to surmise that the ideological point of view of the narrator is that David is consistently characterized in 1 Sam 24-26 as politically brilliant and morally deficient, a man who is not to be emulated.

Political aptitude and immorality are not nearly as contradictory as restraint and unrestraint seem to be. Therefore, the task of this section will be to demonstrate that the outworking of David's character is entirely rooted in the marriage between David's political ambition and moral failure, which is then manifested as *both* unrestraint and restraint.

As already established, David's lack of restraint is most striking in 1 Sam 25. David's encounter with Nabal demonstrates glaring moral deficiency in David's character. In 1 Sam 25 the narrator presents a scope to David that is reticently sketched elsewhere in the story. In this chapter David is prepared to brutally kill a man and his house because of simple resentment.<sup>50</sup> The narratee is able to see clearly from this dark chapter that David is impulsive and violent.

David's moral insufficiency is stressed as a result of Nabal's rhetorical association with Saul. The Nabal-Saul connection is essential to understanding the interplay between David in 1 Sam 25 and David in 1 Sam 24/26. Since Nabal represents Saul, the narratee can be confident in her assumption that as David is with Nabal, so he is with Saul. The implications of this hypothesis are immense. Green observes the lethal attitude David bears in a subtle but real way throughout 1 Sam 24-26:

---

<sup>50</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 265.

In ch. 24 David cuts the edge of Saul's garment, whether we construe the gesture as a castration, an assassination, or some more minimal threatening disrespect. In ch. 26 David takes from a man in the Judean wilderness his water bottle and spear, thus rendering him helpless before the desert elements. And in ch. 25 he prepares, though does not effect, extermination of a whole household and lineage.<sup>51</sup>

Even in 1 Sam 24 and 26, there are clear hints that a lack of restraint is seething below the surface of David's character. This is seen clearly by his actions. Therefore, even in his restraint, David exhibits elements of unrestraint that, like an iceberg, are much greater below the surface than above. Since Nabal is Saul's surrogate in the narrative, the narratee learns just how close David comes to committing regicide against Saul and his entire household.<sup>52</sup> According to this supposition, David demonstrates some measure of restraint regarding Saul with enormous immoral frustration. The narratee witnesses this frustration firsthand in 1 Sam 25, as David girds his sword for battle and speaks profanely against the house of Nabal. The pairing of Nabal and Saul, therefore, enables the narratee to hear David's speech with new ears:

Surely, for vanity I guarded all which [belongs] to this [one] in the wilderness. And, he did not miss – from all which is his – anything! Then he returned to me evil instead of good. So, may God do severely to the enemies of David, and so may he do more, if I spare – from all which are his – by the morning [any] who piss against a wall (1 Sam 25:21-22).

In its original context, David is speaking about Nabal. As a result of Nabal's rhetorical association with Saul, however, the narratee can hear David inwardly seething with this same intent against Saul. David spares Saul's life, but he does strike him twice. Likewise, David also spares Nabal's life, though he was armed and ready to kill.

---

<sup>51</sup> Green, "1 Samuel 25," 9.

<sup>52</sup> Gordon ("David's Rise," 46) mulls over the possibility that David's mobilization against Nabal presents a narrative "double entendre" that hints at the potential fate of the Saulide house.

Whereas David voices his frustration against Nabal/Saul in 1 Sam 25, he stops himself in 1 Sam 24 and 26. Nevertheless, since David's men and Abishai are David's rhetorical alter-egos, the narratee is invited to hear expressions of David's aggravated penchant to kill vocalized by his supporting cast. In 1 Sam 24:5 David's men say: "Behold, the day which YHWH said to you, 'Behold, I am giving your enemy into your hand and you shall do to him according to that which is good in your eyes.'" And, in 1 Sam 26:8 Abishai says: "God delivered – today – your enemy into your hand and now may I strike him please with the spear and the ground with one stroke; and I will not repeat a second time." As David's alter-egos, therefore, they give voice to thoughts and desires innate to David's character.

When the narratee follows this line to its appropriate end, she discovers some frightening conclusions. Just as David girds his sword to eliminate Nabal and his house, so also David longs to violently eliminate Saul and his house. Just as David believes he has been wronged by Nabal, so also he believes he has been wronged by Saul. Just as David desires to return evil to Nabal, so also he wishes to return evil on Saul. And, just as David believes he has the God-given right to act against Nabal, so also he believes he has the God-given right to silence Saul once and for all. The narratee is able to make these assertions because as David is with Nabal, so he is with Saul.

Fortunately, Abigail restrains *this* David before he is able to fulfill his immoral inclinations and thus incur bloodguilt by killing Nabal (and therefore symbolically Saul!). The restraint Abigail brings to David from without in 1 Sam 25, David finds from within in 1 Sam 24 and 26. In all three instances, however, this restraint is not a moral correction, but rather it is a political calculation.

Furthermore, even though David restrains himself from killing, he is not entirely reticent in his actions. Just as David is prepared to attack Nabal, so he is prepared to attack Saul. David symbolically attacks Saul in the cave (1 Sam 24:5) and in the camp (1 Sam 26:12), thus providing himself with a two-time opportunity to shame Saul publicly. Kirkpatrick aptly defines a model of honour and shame that is at work here:

[Honour] is “a claim to worth and the social acknowledgement of that worth” (Malina 1993:32). [Honour] is thus a social commodity. It entails thoughts and feelings as well as [behaviors], includes both personal claims as well as public recognitions, and finds its locus both in the individual and in the social interchange between people, whether individually or corporately (Pitt-Rivers, 1968)... The ancient world conceived of [honour] as a limited commodity. One acquired [honour] only at the expense of another’s [honour]. Thus, social interactions were a constant battlefield to protect [honour] and/or gain more [honour] from others (Pitt-Rivers, 1977:4-13).<sup>53</sup>

In 1 Sam 24:12 and 1 Sam 26:22 David makes a public *claim to worth, and the social acknowledgement of that worth*, by producing the hem of Saul’s robe and Saul’s spear. Since honour is a social commodity, for David to gain this honour Saul must be shamed, which is exactly what happens in these chapters. Saul may keep his life, but he loses his dignity and his honour, which are precious properties for a reigning king. To say that David acts with *complete* restraint in these instances, therefore, is to overlook the public spectacle he makes of Saul. As David proves in 1 Sam 24 and 26 there is more than one way to take the life of the king!

Throughout 1 Sam 24-26 David acts unrestrained. The most obvious case is the middle chapter, where David erupts in a violent fury against the house of Nabal. Nabal’s rhetorical association with Saul makes this outburst shocking and obscene. While this same level of blunt impulsiveness is not demonstrated in 1 Sam 24 and 26, the narratee is

---

<sup>53</sup> Kirkpatrick, “Honor,” 21-22 (citing Malina, *New Testament World*, 32; Pitt-Rivers, Julian, “Honor,” Pitt-Rivers, Shechem, 4-13).

still able to recognize an unrestrained David who grasps at two opportunities to shame the sitting king.

The impressive narrative quality of these chapters, however, is that even while David demonstrates a clear lack of restraint against Nabal/Saul, he concurrently conjures a remarkable self-control, invoked internally (in 1 Sam 24 and 26) and externally (in 1 Sam 25), so that he stops himself three times from striking a lethal blow. To the restrained David we now turn our attention.

David's restraint is best portrayed by his the sparing of Saul's life in 1 Sam 24 and 26. Although David is not entirely restrained, as discussed above, he nevertheless does exercise some self-control. In both chapters Saul is practically gift wrapped for David and, should he choose to lethally strike the king, Saul would be defenseless to try and stop him. In spite of this, David shrewdly decides to let YHWH's anointed live to see another day. Even though many commentators cite David's refusal to kill Saul as evidence of his purity of heart and obsession with innocence, there may be other reasons he stops his hand.<sup>54</sup>

The narratee is given significant insight into the reasons why David refrains from killing Saul in 1 Sam 25:32-33:

Blessed be YHWH, the God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me. And blessed be your discernment and blessed be you, who stopped me this day from coming in with blood (from entering into bloodguilt) and saving, by my hands, myself.

Although David is here speaking to Abigail about Nabal, the ironic parallels between Abigail-David and Nabal-Saul enable the narratee to import this same sentiment into David's relationship with Saul. As is evident in this short speech, David's mercy is not an

---

<sup>54</sup> Alter, *David Story*, 148; Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 252; Tsumura (*1 Samuel*, 567) accepts the sincerity of David's restraint based solely on Saul's position as YHWH's anointed.

act of moral benevolence. Rather, David spares Nabal/Saul's life because it is politically astute for him to do so. To kill Nabal/Saul would cause David to enter into bloodguilt, which has both theological and political consequences. Here we will examine the political benefits of sparing Nabal/Saul.

First, each moment provides David with a profound opportunity to disciple his fellow bandits by teaching and demonstrating that it is never acceptable to kill the king.<sup>55</sup> This is a practical lesson given David's expectation that he will one day become king in Saul's place (according to the promise of Samuel's anointing of him in 1 Sam 16).<sup>56</sup>

In 1 Sam 26 Abishai receives a personal one-on-one teaching moment with David as they go down to Saul's camp together. This intimate moment with David is valuable because of Abishai's familial connections.<sup>57</sup> His brother, Joab, will become David's general for most of his reign as king. This opportunity to teach and reinforce the value of the life of the king is especially important for Abishai (and indirectly with Joab) since they will wield considerable power in David's future administration.<sup>58</sup> The foresight required in this instance further exposes that David is established as a character with a fascinating political mind.

Second, by sparing Saul's life, David is afforded an opportunity to speak publicly in his own defense. The long intercourses between Saul and David in 1 Sam 24 and 26 are stunning works of propaganda for David's character.<sup>59</sup> By producing real evidence of Saul's vulnerable brush with death (the hem of Saul's robe and Saul's spear and water

---

<sup>55</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 277.

<sup>56</sup> Alter, *David Story*, 148; Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 253; Polzin, *Deuteronomist*, 210.

<sup>57</sup> Alter, *David Story*, 163.

<sup>58</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 276-277; Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 158; Day ("Abishai," 547) notices that Abishai learns the lesson, not to raise a hand against YHWH's anointed, so well that when Shimei curses and throws stones at David (2 Sam 16:5-8), Abishai offers to decapitate him (2 Sam 16:9).

<sup>59</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 253; Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 169-170.

jug), David is able to physically demonstrate his innocence and, therefore, claim to have taken the high road even in spite of Saul's ravenous quest to take his life.<sup>60</sup>

At the same time, David is able to publicly shame Saul by suggesting that the king is wrong for pursuing him. Kirkpatrick asserts: "The court of public opinion is the final arbiter of [honour] and shame, making reputation one of the most important valuables to possess."<sup>61</sup> Likewise, Olyan writes:

In short, [honour] and shame communicate relative social status, which may shift over time... [Honour] is meant to be recognized and acknowledged; it is very much a public phenomenon. Loss of [honour] or diminishment results in shame; diminishment communicates a loss of social status. Like [honour] and its inscription, diminishment and shame also have a public dimension...<sup>62</sup>

By his very public displays of "innocence," David cunningly shames Saul. Surely David's men and Saul's men, who are present during these interchanges, would be affected by such a profound moment.<sup>63</sup> In addition, it is likely that David is aware that sympathy not antipathy from Saul's army will prove to be most beneficial in order to become king. This double exposure before the troops, therefore, works beautifully to David's political advantage.

Even while David is careful to portray his innocence by producing the hem of Saul's robe and Saul's water jug and spear for all to see, he simultaneously makes two subliminal claims for the throne by his symbolic attacks on Saul.<sup>64</sup> In 1 Sam 24 David actually makes an audacious claim on the throne by cutting Saul's robe:

In the present chapter David cuts off the corner of Saul's robe, and symbolically makes a bid for his status as king, for the royal robe stood for the royal office, and

---

<sup>60</sup> Alter, *David Story*, 149; Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 278; Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 197; Polzin, *Deuteronomist*, 207.

<sup>61</sup> Kirkpatrick, "Honor," 22.

<sup>62</sup> Olyan, "Honor," 204 (cited by Lapsley, "Shame," 147).

<sup>63</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 279.

<sup>64</sup> Green ("1 Samuel 25," 9) notes: "Common is David's verbally organized picture of himself as sparing Saul while in face he commits two – and symbolically three – lethal deeds."

already the robe-tearing had been interpreted by Samuel as a symbol of the cutting off of Saul's dynasty (1 Sam 15:28). Now David had 'grasped at' the kingship of Israel by cutting away part of Saul's robe, and by calling the king his 'father' he was preparing the way for a legitimate claim to the throne after Saul's death.<sup>65</sup>

Likewise, in 1 Sam 26, knowing how he is about to use the confiscated item to his political benefit, David carefully chooses to steal Saul's spear:

In the episode at the cave, David carried away the cut-off corner of Saul's garment, which had been symbolically linked with kingship. The spear is an alternative image of kingship, obviously more directly associated with the martial potency, and so this version conveys a greater sense that David is depriving Saul of something essential in the token of kingship he bears off.<sup>66</sup>

David's political brilliance in these two instances is showcased by his ability to communicate two opposite claims concurrently. In one respect, the ripped-robe and the spear convey his innocence because they demonstrate that David had been afforded the opportunity to kill Saul but decided not to.<sup>67</sup> In the other respect, however, David is holding two items of potent kingly symbolism in his very hands. Therefore, when David asserts, "Know and see that nothing in my hand is evil or rebellion," in 1 Sam 24:12, he is speaking a half truth. Yes, David spared Saul's life, but at the same time he is holding Saul's very kingship in his hand. This is true for both chapters. The poetry of the moment is thick with David's trademark brilliance.

---

<sup>65</sup> Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 146; Bodner (*1 Samuel*, 251-252) suggests that the cutting of Saul's robe is impregnated with symbolism. Saul ripped Samuel's robe unintentionally in 1 Sam 15:27 and received a prophetic indictment that his kingdom, like the robe, would be ripped from his hand. Here, David cuts Saul's robe intentionally. The narratee is invited, therefore, to connect the two incidents and recognize that this "innocent act" by David has deep symbolic implications. Saul will lose the kingdom to David; Evans (*1 & 2 Samuel*, 107) agrees that the cutting of Saul's robe has symbolic implications: "Royal garments have symbolic significance, and to take part of Saul's robe in this way, given the relationship between Saul and David, symbolizes seizing power."; also: Alter, *David Story*, 148; Gordon, *1 & II Samuel*, 179; Gordon, "David's Rise," 55-56; Klein, *1 Samuel*, 239; Polzin, *Deuteronomist*, 209; Tsumura (*1 Samuel*, 566) does not agree that this episode should be connected to 1 Sam 15: "The two occasions are totally different and the significance of 'cutting off' and of 'tearing' of the garment is not the same; see on 15:27. If nothing else, in the earlier case, the one who tore the robe would have things torn from him, while in the later, the one whose robe was cut would lose. Symbols must be taken in context."

<sup>66</sup> Alter, *David Story*, 164.

<sup>67</sup> Klein, *1 Samuel*, 239.

Third, in both instances David secures a public admission of guilt from Saul. In 1

Sam 24:18-20 Saul declares:

“You are more righteous than me because you recompensed me with good, but I recompensed you with evil. And you declared today that you did good to me when YHWH delivered me into your hand but you did not kill me. Now, if a man finds his enemy will he send him on a good road? Therefore, YHWH, may he recompense you with good on account of this day; what you did for me.”

Likewise, in 1 Sam 26:21 Saul announces:

“I have sinned. Return my son David because I will not harm you in exchange for which my soul was precious in your eyes this day. Behold, I have been foolish and I have sinned very greatly.”

In many ways, these royal admission are a greater political coup than the slaying of Saul ever could have been. As Brueggemann acknowledges:

Unless Saul knows and acknowledges David’s right to the future, the tension, the conflict, the restlessness in Israel will never stop. If Saul does not acknowledge, the old hopes of failed Israel can fight a destructive rearguard action for a very long time. Even in his failure, Saul has it in his power to prevent the fruition of David’s promised kingdom, to thwart Yahweh’s resolve about Israel’s future... Finally in a desperate instant of truth, Saul says, ‘You shall be king.’<sup>68</sup>

These are also the key moments when Saul capitulates to David’s public shaming of him.

Kirkpatrick explains:

A claim against one’s [honour] can be perceived in the words or the deeds of another party. In both cases, it is a claim to enter the social space of another either positively, to share in the prestige of the other, or negatively, to take away or diminish the other’s reputation. This action is then interpreted according to the seriousness of the challenge to one’s [honour]. The riposte, or response, can take many different forms. Three main responses are possible. First, positive rejection, that is scorning the challenge, is the proper response form the one who is challenged by a social inferior... Second, negative refusal, on the other end of the range, also consists in not responding... Third, the counter-challenge is another possible, and frequent, response in riposte.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 172-173.

<sup>69</sup> Kirkpatrick, “Honor,” 24.

David twice (1 Sam 24:8-15 and 26:14-20) makes *a claim to enter the social space* of Saul and rather than meet David's challenge by one of the three ways listed above, Saul surrenders his honour to David. David's "restraint," therefore, pays off with great dividends of political capital.<sup>70</sup> This windfall of capital will be needed if David hopes to take hold of the office for which he has been anointed.<sup>71</sup>

Fourth, in addition to Saul's self-incriminating admissions, he also makes spectacular proclamations about David in the presence of his men.<sup>72</sup> In 1 Sam 24:21-22 Saul says:

"And now, behold, I know that as king you will reign and into your hand the kingdom of Israel will rise up. But now, swear an oath to me in YHWH that you will not cut off my seed after me and that you will not destroy my name from the house of my father."

With much the same sentiment, Saul declares in 1 Sam 26:25: "Blessed are you my son David, for you will surely profit and also you will surely overcome." In many ways, Saul's reign is all but over by the end of 1 Sam 26. He has admitted his faults and exalted David's destiny in the presence of his army and David's men. David never could have received an equal endorsement had he killed Saul in either chapter.

At this point in David's career, Saul is much more valuable to him alive rather than dead. David's ability to discern the importance of playing the long-game instead of giving in to the temptations of the short-game demonstrates his rare and astute political acumen.<sup>73</sup> A less able man would surely take the shortcut to power unknowingly crippling himself in the process. By demonstrating restraint David disciplines his followers

---

<sup>70</sup> Alter, *David Story*, 151, 167; Bodner, *I Samuel*, 255-256; Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 174.

<sup>71</sup> Baldwin (*I & 2 Samuel*, 146) acknowledges the significance of Saul's public recognition that David will succeed him as king.

<sup>72</sup> Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 197.

<sup>73</sup> Brueggemann (*Samuel*, 184) writes: "David would rather have Saul's emblem of power than Saul's life. There is not bloodguilt attached to spear-taking."

so that they see and learn that under no circumstances is anyone to kill YHWH's anointed. In addition, he has secured a ringing endorsement from Saul to succeed the reigning king. Now, all David has to do is wait.

### *Conclusion*

In all three chapters David is ultimately restrained. David does not kill even though he symbolically attacks Nabal/Saul in each chapter (1 Sam 24:5, 25:21-22, 26:12). At the same time, in all three chapters David wrestles with his lack of restraint, as is evident by his symbolic attacks on Nabal/Saul. In 1 Sam 24 and 26, David musters restraint internally against external exhortations of unrestraint. In 1 Sam 25 David recklessly abandons all restraint but is persuaded toward restraint externally via Abigail. Although there are external agents in each chapter coaxing David in opposite directions, 1 Sam 24-26 exhibits consistency in David's character.

On the surface these two alternatives, to be unrestrained and to be restrained, seem mutually exclusive. The reason for this is that moral decency is far too often associated with David's restraint. In David's case, however, he does not stop himself from killing to appease his moral conscience. His reticence is rather self-motivated and rooted in political mastery. In many ways, therefore, even David's restraint is laced with traces of immorality, which is most apparent by his clever two-time public shaming of Saul. David's political ambition manifests itself as restraint and his unhindered depravity is the well spring of his unrestraint. This being the case, David is consistently characterized in 1 Sam 24-26 even though he appears to be acting in contradictory ways. Even while the narratee cannot help but appreciate David's fascinating political mind,

David is not a man to be emulated. David may be doing the right things, but he does them for the wrong reasons.

Further analysis, which roots these conclusions in the broader David novella (of 1 Sam 16 – 1 Kgs 2), would strengthen the hypothesis of this paper. The goal of further examination would be to demonstrate that all that transpires in David's life – the highs and the lows – is the outworking of his political brilliance and the lack of his moral fortitude. To make sense of a character so depraved and yet so central to Biblical theology the study must also consider the role of YHWH, especially regarding the unconditional favour He bestows on David. The final result of this extended work would hopefully demonstrate the power of God's grace to redeem David for His purposes. Accordingly, it would highlight the hope that we, depraved men and women, also have in YHWH, David's God, for our own redemption.

## Bibliography

- Ackerman, James S. "Abishai." *NIDB*: 14 2006
- Alter, Robert. *The David Story*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999.
- Baldwin, Joyce G. *1 & 2 Samuel*. Downer's Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988.
- Biddle, Mark E. "Ancestral Motifs in 1 Samuel 25: Intertextuality and Characterization." *JBL* 121 (2002) 617-638.
- Bodner, Keith. *1 Samuel: A Narrative Commentary*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008.
- Brown, Adam. "Discovering David in Light of 1 Samuel 25: A Narrative Critical Reading of 1 Samuel 24-26." M.A. thesis, McMaster Divinity College, 2009.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *First and Second Samuel*. Interpretation. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990.
- Day, Peggy L. "Abishai the satan in 2 Samuel 19:17-24." *CBQ* 49 no 4 O (1987) 543-547.
- Dorsey, David A. *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis – Malachi*. Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 1999.
- Evans, Mary J. *1 & 2 Samuel*. NIBC. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000.
- Gordon, Robert P. *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986.
- , "David's Rise and Saul's Demise: Narrative Analogy in 1 Samuel 24-26." *TynBul* 31 (1980) 37-64.
- Green, Barbara. "Enacting Imaginatively the Unthinkable: 1 Samuel 25 and the Story of Saul." *BI* 11, 1 (2003) 1-23.
- Hertzberg, Hans Wilhelm. *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964.
- Jobling, David. *1 Samuel*. BO. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998.
- Kirkpatrick, Shane. "Questions of Honor in the Book of Judges." *Koinonia* X/1 (1998) 19-40.
- Klein, Ralph W. *WBC: 1 Samuel*. Waco: Word Books, 1983.

- Lapsley, Jacqueline E. "Shame and Self-Knowledge: The Positive Role of Shame in Ezekiel's View of the Moral Self." In *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong, 143-173. Atlanta: SBL, 2000.
- Long, V. Philips. "Scenic, Succinct, Subtle: An Introduction to the Literary Artistry of 1&2 Samuel." *Pres* 19/1 (1993) 32-47.
- Malina, Bruce J. *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. Revised edition. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993.
- Marlowe, Christopher. *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. Clayton: Prestwick House, 2007.
- McCarter, P. Kyle Jr. *1 Samuel*. AB. Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1980.
- Miscall, Peter D. *1 Samuel: A Literary Reading*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.
- Olyan, Saul M. "Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations in Ancient Israel and its Environment." *JBL* 115 (1996) 201-218.
- Pitt-Rivers, Julian. "Honor." In *IESS*. Vol. 6, 503-511.
- , *The Fate of Shechem, or the Politics of Sex: Essays in the Anthropology of the Mediterranean*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- Polzin, Robert. *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History, Part Two: 1 Samuel*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Robinson, Gnana. *1 & 2 Samuel: Let Us Be Like the Nations*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993.
- Tsumura, David Toshio. *The First Book of Samuel*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007.
- Whitelam, Keith W. "The Defense of David." *JSOT* 29 (1984) 61-87.